

# ECHANGES

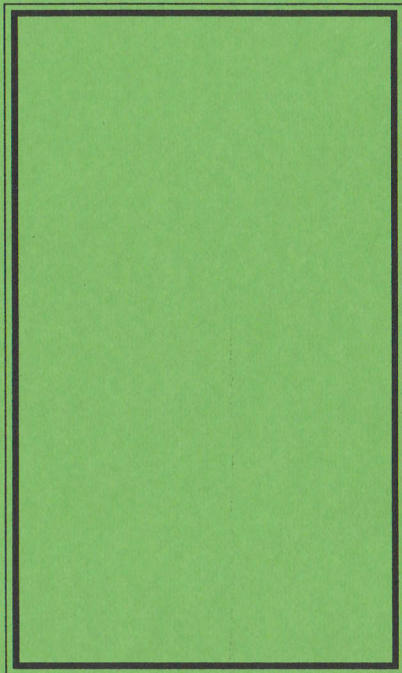
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BULLETIN OF THE NETWORK  
'ECHANGES ET MOUVEMENT'

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FRANCE

TO



UK:  
THE POST-THATCHER PERIOD

CENTRAL AMERICA:  
WHAT IS 'SOLIDARISMO'?  
EL SALVADOR: THE PEACE ACCORDS

CLASS STRUGGLE IN FRANCE 1990-93

ITALY

'ALTERNATIVE UNIONS'  
AND 'STRUGGLE ORGANISATIONS'  
DEBATE ON NEW DEVELOPMENTS IN THE CLASS STRUGGLE  
AND THE FRENCH, SPANISH AND ITALIAN EXPERIENCES

POLAND:  
SOME STRUGGLES

CANADA:  
FACTORY OCCUPATION.  
QUEBEC BUILDING WORKERS REVOLT.



## ECHANGES

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Any small contributions welcomed.

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## About this issue of Echanges

The main bulk of material in this issue is about class struggle in France and Italy and about a discussion on 'alternative unions' and 'struggle organisations'. Most of this material was not written recently. The delay in publishing it is partly due to delays in translating. But it is also because for a while now we have tried to put together some 'dossiers' on class struggle with material covering a longer period (as with the 'dossier' on Spain in the previous issue), material linked together through the questions they describe and discuss, in order to provide a general understanding of our analysis of present society and the struggles taking place. The material on Spain, France and Italy from no.70/71 onwards forms a background to the discussion on class struggle and 'alternative unionism' in the present issue of *Echanges*. We preferred to put all this material together in these issues and add some other material to fill the issues, rather than publishing more recent material we have on some of the countries. In the next issues there will however come more recent material on struggles in for example France and Italy, logically and chronologically following up what we have published until now.

Reviews of a number of journals received by *Echanges* will have to follow in a later issue due to lack of space.

In the material especially about France in this issue it is also dealt with some questions often referred to in *Echanges* material previously. We are thinking about the 'vulnerability' of the present methods of capitalist organisation and production, especially of its 'just-in-time' method both in production and distribution, where actions of a small group of workers in a factory, one factory itself or in the transport sector can have widespread consequences.

## Forthcoming issues

Among some of the large number of material for the next issues is the following:

- ☛ France: Struggles from the Autumn of '93 onwards (Air France strike, Jan. '94 manifestation against the private schools, Spring '94 actions against the minimum wage for youth)
- ☛ An extensive dossier about social conditions, struggles and trade unions in ex-USSR
- ☛ Material about USA: Various struggles, social conditions, correspondence with contacts, vulnerability of new production methods...
- ☛ Class struggle in Bangla Desh
- ☛ Spain: Effects of the French and Spanish truckers strikes in '92. Struggles and developments in '93.
- ☛ Considerations about present debates on the ultra-left
- ☛ Struggles in Holland
- ☛ India: Various struggles. Debate with Kamunist Kranti.
- ☛ Notes on the situation in Scandinavia.
- ☛ Resurgence of workers' struggles in Indonesia.
- ☛ Struggles in Germany.
- ☛ Articles about Guatemala
- ☛ Struggles in Argentina
- ☛ Struggles in (ex)-Yugoslavia
- ☛ Discussions with readers
- ☛ Material about Haiti, Vietnam, China and many other countries
- ☛ On 'workers councils'

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Some pamphlets will also be produced in the coming period - one of them will be about the development of the Spanish dockers' union Coordinadora.



To be able to bring out all this material and continue the publication of *Echanges*, which is the work of less than a handful of comrades having too much to do, we ask the readers for some help in various ways.

**Firstly, in the previous issue we included a circular letter which we asked everybody to return. This had the purpose both of checking the addresses and of removing from the distribution list those no longer interested in receiving our material. Very few have returned the form, so therefore we ask once again that this is done.**

**We will also ask those who are interested in our material to renew their subscription if it is a long time since they have sent something, those who have never paid anything to send a contribution, and if someone is interested in making a special contribution that is of course very welcome and encouraging.**

In addition we ask for any help in getting the material known to more people and increase the circulation. Help in this respect could consist in checking if various bookshops are interested in the material, encouraging friends and contacts to take a subscription, send material to persons, groups or organisations one think could be interested or send us their addresses, mention *Echanges* if one produces or writes to various journals, etc.

We are also still interested in and in many respect dependent upon readers sending us information or articles (made by themselves or taken from other publications) about struggles and conditions in various countries, as well as interesting articles in general.

### Dans le monde une classe en lutte

In addition to our French edition, we have started to produce a small bulletin with the name *Dans le monde une classe en lutte* ('All over the world a class in struggle'). This is a way to spread some of the information we collect ourselves or receive from readers about struggles all over the world. The bulletin gives just the basic information about the

struggles without any further analysis and aims at the widest possible dissemination of this information. It is therefore distributed for free to all bookshops, organisations and groups willing to take a number of copies for further distribution. We do not have the capacity to make a similar bulletin in English, but will utilise the material either in the English *Echanges* or in the bulletin *Collective Action Notes* (see below).

### Collective Action

Friends in the US have started publication under the name *Collective Action*. Among pamphlets produced so far are reprints of the old texts like H. Simon's articles *The new movement and On organisation*, and also a reprint of an old News & Letters pamphlet with the title *The Maryland Freedom Union* (about independent rank and file unionism among black nursing home workers in Baltimore in 1966).

They have also issued two issues so far of the small bulletin *Collective Action Notes*. Starting with issue, no.2 *CAN* will be sent to everybody on the *Echanges* distribution list. This will mean that some material from *CAN* which we normally would have reprinted doesn't have to appear in *Echanges*. *CAN* on its side will use material from our bulletin *Dans le monde*...

Those interested in receiving *CAN* no.1 can write to: Collective Action, POB 22962, Baltimore, MD 21203. The first issue contained the articles *Soup kitchens: a US growth industry* and *The reflux* (a story on being on welfare at the end of the 60s) and a chronology of strikes in the US October to December '93.

We now and then experience that readers of *Echanges* are interested in various kinds of contacts between themselves. Readers in the US who are interested in any kind of contact with other readers or Collective Action, are encouraged to write to the Collective Action address.

DANS LE MONDE  
UNE CLASSE EN LUTTE

## UK

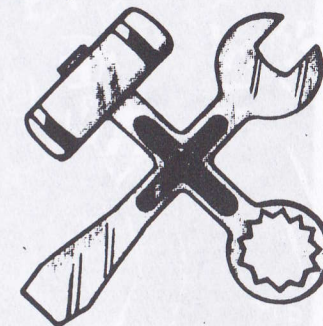
### THE POST-THATCHER PERIOD - ECONOMIC, SOCIAL AND POLITICAL CHANGES AND DEVELOPMENTS

3 years ago we published the pamphlet *SHAKE IT AND BREAK IT. Class and politics in Britain 1979/1989*. It contained two articles: 1) H. Simon: *The social and political crisis in the UK during 'The winter of discontent'. The strikes and the fall of the Labour Government (1978/79)*. This text describes the second great post-war crisis which saw a social crisis leading to the fall of the government (the first crisis brought down the conservative Heath government in 1974). These two high points merely represents the most striking moments in the class struggle, which has had to stand against the union apparatuses ever since the end of the second world war. These two crisis were replies to attempts to submit this autonomous movement to the needs of capital. Just as with the strikes in 1972-74, those in 1978-79 saw the use of the practice of secondary picketing as an autonomous weapon, with the struggle slipping away from the control of the unions. The 'intolerable' situation led to a political crisis and the introduction of a government sworn to smash the autonomous movement.

2) David Brown: *Myths of Thatcherism*. The following are extracts from the foreword to this article: "Frequently we see the idea that the form of the government policy in the UK seems to contain the vague outlines of an almost military style reconnaissance seeking a solution to the problems of the economy and society, almost as if there were a rigid programme for "the Thatcherian

revolution" to be imposed at all costs... much evidence may be produced in favour of such a theory, we may recall the violence of the miners' strike, the printworkers, on the streets of Brixton and dozens of other cities... But this image endures only because it suits right and left, capitalists and trade unionists, conservatives and labourites. It offers the government an ample margin to demonstrate its decisiveness... The image suits the labourites and their unions as it allows them to forget and help others forget that it was just them who tried out for first a policy of public spending cuts and privatisation... The image also suits the capitalist class as it demonstrates that it is serious about business after years of messing about by the state... This image, nevertheless, is unconvincing both empirically and methodologically... If the government has something to boast about it is having gained an extended support, unlike that of the past, based on the traditional groups of the Conservative Party... Generally speaking, we can see that a different structure supporting the government came into being, a clear indication of major social mobility which may well remain permanent, at least during this economic cycle... Secondly, the creation of a state with a manifest will to intervene does not fit with a policy aimed at making the entrepreneurial class responsible for its own actions... on many occasions legislation dealing with labour relations became a real millstone around the necks of the industrial leaders."

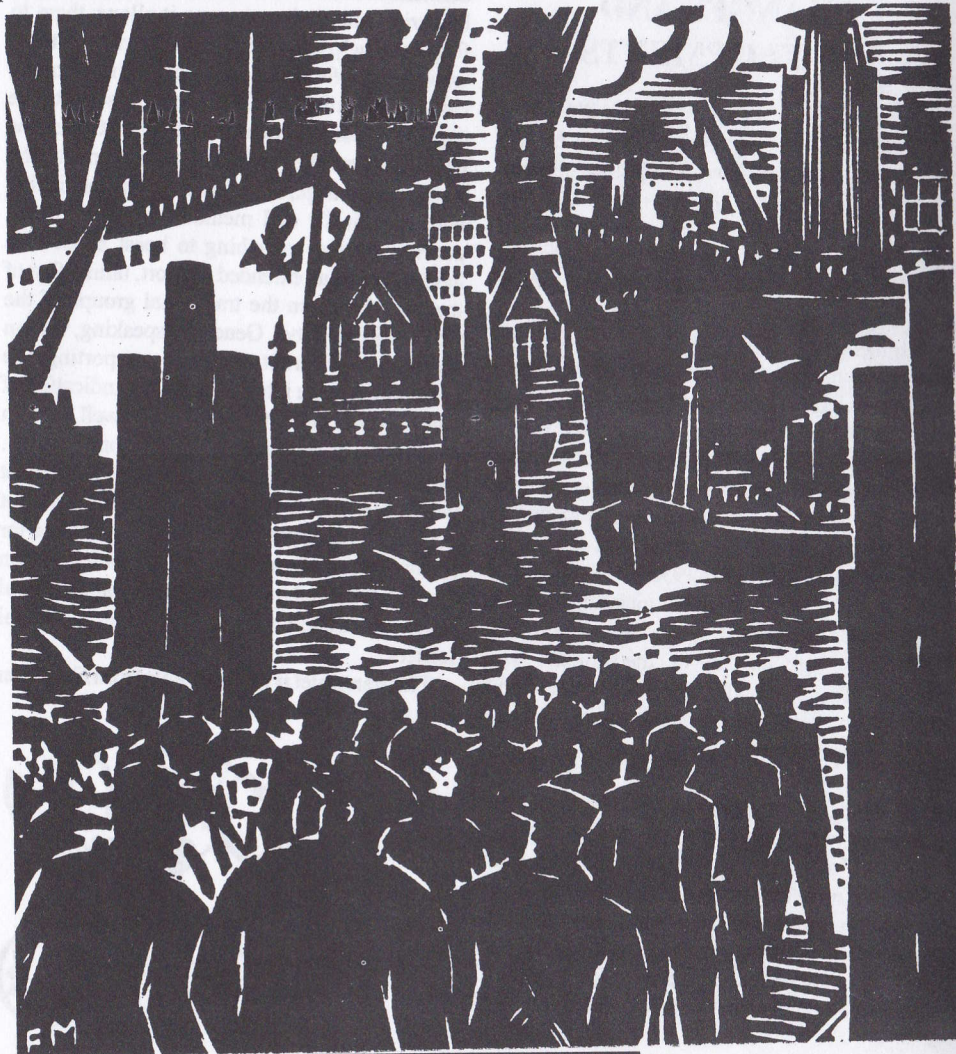
**This pamphlet is still available from *Echanges* - 38 pages, price 90p.**



In this issue we publish an article by D. Brown (written end of '92) about developments in the UK in the post-Thatcher period under a new conservative government, complementing his article in the pamphlet. It deals with the economic recession, the further rise of unemployment and homelessness, the anti-poll tax events and especially with privatisation. Despite for example the much published reduction in industrial conflicts believed

to cure 'the English disease', the article points out that the social regime represented by the government can't solve fundamental problems and class conflicts and that the conservative 'triumphalism of the 80s has passed.' We can also refer to the article *UK - Some considerations on recent events in Echanges no.63.*, and some more material on UK will follow in the next issues.

RH



Since the completion of the article on the 1980s in the UK, there have been several changes and developments that should be discussed. Although the most visible change was the fall of Mrs. Thatcher at the elections for party leader and the substitution by a previously almost unknown man, Mr. Major, this was only a symptom of a series of shifts that were less evident: the economic recession (both its dimensions and its nature), the rise of unemployment and homelessness (and linked to this the anti-Poll Tax campaign and riot), the question of the Europeanisation of the economy, the new phase of privatization proposals and procedures.

With the crash of the stockmarkets in late 1987, the fear of a generalized economic crisis obliged the state, as elsewhere, to adopt a reflationist policy to buoy up the stock exchange which was now just changing into top gear with the privatization offers double those of 1986 and four times those of 1983 (in 1987 the range of £5-6 bln. p.a. was first reached and this figure was supposed to remain constant until everything that could be sold had been). The policy to this extent was a success, the index returned to only slightly below the record level, but at the cost of rapid inflation that took the retail price index to 11% and the consequent rapid deflation to get it down again that then caused the impending international recession to become perhaps the longest and deepest since the 1930s with a massive number of company closures and redundancies, a fall in GDP of several percentage points and the return to net government borrowing (peaking at about 3.5% of the GDP in 1991).

However, what was more remarkable about this recession was the nature of it rather than the dimensions. The areas that were hard hit were not the traditional old industrial or peripheral areas, such as Scotland, Wales and the North, but London, the South East and West, East Anglia and the East and West Midlands where, to use one current index, house prices fell, even dramatically, while they continued to rise elsewhere. Why was it that the regions closest to the capital and to the European markets, the ones most favoured by the vast growth of the financial structures of the city, but also the ones of most government spending, the natural habitat of the new aggressive entrepreneurial class and a now atomized working class, deprived of community feeling by the housing boom and the collapse of the unions, but above all by the increased job mobility of the period, why should they be the ones to suffer? Also, why were the jobs that were lost very often in the advanced tertiary sector and not just in rather backward industries such as car manufacturing. It is difficult to state simply that these areas were more market orientated and therefore felt adverse affects more strongly or that they had grown too fast in the mid-80s and had overheated and needed to cool down.

Something more fundamental had happened. An economic crisis occurs when the disparity between the various categories of a capitalist economy becomes excessive, for example the level

of credit, and has to be reduced. The enormous generation of fictitious capital, centred on London, but covering an area much wider than the UK (some figures are given in a subsequent paragraph), inevitably concentrated this procedure on a relatively narrow base. A comparison with the even larger New York stock exchange and the rest of the eastern USA is a much better comparison than that of other European countries where stock exchanges have often performed much worse but the recession has been weaker, usually without a fall in GDP.

A gauge to this new reality for the formerly richer South can be found in the Poll Tax riot in London. The cost of council provided social services are very high in London and with the recession and falling population, the tax base narrowed. In order to reduce local government spending, the Conservative Party had already issued a mass of legislation on compulsory council house sales, rate capping, withdrawal of grant aid, dissolution of the Metropolitan counties (i.e. big city councils), all aimed at squeezing the Labour Party out of its last remnants of institutional power and autonomous policy making, the "socialism on the rates" concept. The Poll Tax was seen as the straw to break the camel's back. By making the cost of services fall equally on all residents instead of being based on a property tax (that hit especially the richer residents and business), it was hoped that on receiving the tax bill there would be a revolt against high spending, usually Labour, councils. The logic could be backed up by many arguments like: why does an unemployed teenager pay the same tube fare as the chairman of a city bank while they pay different contributions for the library service? There was also perhaps the hope that many people, especially the poor young and mobile ones (students, those coming to London to find work, drifters) would, to avoid paying the tax, fail to register in the only form of residence reporting, the electoral roll, so losing the vote that quite probably would have gone to the Labour Party.

This overkill of the Labour Party backfired, firstly in Scotland, where the new tax was originally tested and was resisted passively and massively by disobedience largely sponsored by the Labour Party and its fringes, then by the 'worst riot in London for 200 years'. Perhaps the government should have noted a previous development. The Liverpool City council (Labour) had continued to overspend according to the government, so funds were cut off. The leader of the council then sent out letters dismissing all the employees saying that the government was to blame. The backlash was, however, against the council. In short, in such circumstances, people generally do not like their economic survival used as a political football.

Here, however, some more comment is required. It was not the Labour Party that organized the riot, nor even the group that most closely identified with it (Class War). It was a more or less spontaneous outburst that, according to some accounts, drew in people who had not even been involved in the

demonstration beforehand and were in Central London that afternoon for the usual weekend window shopping and meeting friends. Perversely the areas that still had major Labour Party support had avoided such a violent confrontation, while it seems that in the London area the party had been so thoroughly cut down to size over a decade that it could not even establish itself as a buffer, as an integrator of protest into electoral politics. Certainly the Labour Party has lost 2/3 of its individual members and the unions 1/4-1/3 since 1979, they were still able to minimize the violence during the miner's strike (there have since been several court cases for damages brought by injured miners with decisions showing that the police was quite responsible for the fighting), but now they were unable to. The confirmation, in their own terms, came in April 1992 when, despite all the economic and other problems of the Conservative government, Labour lost yet another general election, or with the continued pressure of the unions on their members to be realistic and accept the Japanization of the factory (the latest case being the Rover Group where this was narrowly accepted in a vote among the workers, but there are also Unipart and some others to consider).

What will happen to the Poll Tax is still unclear, vague promises to alleviate some of the more excessive features have been made, but no concrete action has been taken.

The Poll Tax riot was frequently given as the reason for ditching the Prime Minister. This is too hasty a conclusion if we examine the nature of those who refused to vote for her. In many cases they are closely involved in the London financial markets and had an international, if not worldwide, approach to economic questions, unlike that of the provincial and rural elements in the party. They were increasingly dismayed by the staunch opposition to the Maastricht proposals, later voted in December 1991, while they would either have preferred a more diplomatic approach, based on the mass of economic literature that shows that the proposals are hurried and utopian or, for Britain, damaging, or to let the process go forward towards an almost inevitable collapse and major modification (which appears to have started with the recent referendum in Denmark and the nationalistic stirrings in both Germany and France, the two countries that really count for something in the EC).

The question was simply about money. London intends to be the main financial centre for its time zone, alongside New York (with the smaller centres in the rest of the USA and Canada) and Tokyo, but whereas these latter two markets have no rivals worth mentioning and represent much larger economies than that of the UK, Europe is full of other national and regional stock exchanges, in three cases in states with larger GDPs than the UK. The reform of the markets in the 1980s, coupled with the general backwardness and small size of the rest of Europe, meant that London was able, through its computerized, real time dealing, called SEAQ international, to grab a major share (93%) of European cross-border business, in the 5 years since

its creation (1986-91) taking away 30% from Paris, 52% from the Netherlands, 45% from Sweden, 10% from Germany and 70% from Italy of their cross-border operations (1). Now, if at the end of the Maastricht agreement period (1999), there were to be a real European currency, but still a separate sterling, this would place London at a great disadvantage both in terms of isolation and of costs.

There are different worries for the other financial sectors. For insurance, if London is to remain a world centre, many feel that the Lloyds operation will have to be cleaned up, while in banking the inertia of such massive investment in London from abroad and the fact that much of it is not from Europe make things easier. However, since the three aspects are closely interwoven, disquiet in one of them can only pass on to the others.

The result can be seen: Mr. Major accepted the Maastricht agreement, if rather unwillingly, if only as a facade for party electoral purposes, but since has tried hard to convince others to toe the line. It seems that 'government by the stock exchange' is more than just a polemical slogan.

The sale of state owned activities and assets has continued, but now at the regular and monotonous pace of £6 bln. per annum, with increasing mistrust and worry. The easy sales of the 1980s are over. They were easy both because they had clear activities and assets (or often losses) and politically so because of their unpopularity, either for their monopolistic pricing policies and inefficiency or because of the troublesome unionized workforces. They saw industries and utility suppliers as well as telecommunications and some transport activities disposed of, sometimes, as with British Steel and British Leyland with major restructuring (which in the case of the latter has continued: a rump called the Rover Group seems to be surviving partly because of its Japanization - 20% belongs to Honda, but the bus division, sold to Volvo (Sweden), has more or less disappeared, the truck business, sold to DAF (Netherlands) is losing money hand over fist, while the fate of Jaguar, sold to Ford is still very doubtful).

British Coal, although the most drastic case of restructuring, seems unlikely to be sold for the time being as it operates protected from the world market selling overpriced coal. It is openly stated that the management would gladly cut production still further to a mere 25m tonnes by 1996 (1/4 of the level before the strike and less than 1/2 the present 65m tonnes) from very few pits (less than 14 instead of 50 now) (2). The privatizations of the recent past and the next ones on the list are more problematic. The sale of the water industry worried many people not just about the control over water quality but also the possibility that the massive land holdings would be used for speculative building. That of the power generating and distribution system was more a problem of economics. Various questions were not really answered: Who

would pay for the nuclear programme, if it continued to be unprofitable? Would the private generators be forced to buy overpriced coal from British Coal or could they go to world market suppliers? Then the same question for the private gas monopoly.

Attention at present is focused on the railways and, to a lesser extent, the Post Office and the worries are of two different types. The Post Office offers one of the best and cheapest services in Europe and even makes a profit, industrial relations are not so chaotic now and the managers are quite eager to take on private couriers on their own terms (one of them, Federal Express has already been forced out of the market). The question is why such an organization, which costs the taxpayer nothing and is associated with the image of the friendly postman coming round every day (we could recall the furore caused when the EC tried to have the figure of the equally liked milkman abolished), should be sold for an ideological whim or a quick flutter on the stock exchange. Also the public is worried that some of the services that obviously make no money (like sending Christmas cards or holiday postcards to friends all round the country) might be reduced or the subsidy on them removed.

The same worry underlies opposition to the sale of the railways, which, like just about all railways in the world, lose money. After rejecting the idea of returning to the regional monopolies before nationalization, the government now proposes not to dispose of many of the assets (track, signals, stations etc.) but to reorganize them in 'business centres' and lease them out to operators of services. So far offers have been made to run the east coast mainline express service to Scotland (a kind of poorman's TGV) and to reconstruct a rail line from Leicester to near London, connecting it to the Channel Tunnel routes for freight transport. (This, strangely, is exactly the opposite to the case of the USA: the infrastructure belongs to the private rail companies and the passenger trains run along them belong to the state's Amtrack.) No one, of course has made any kind of offer for local services and provincial lines, as they lose money and can never be made profitable (and serve areas largely with Conservative MPs). These services cannot be closed like an unprofitable mine or factory because it would mean the collapse of commuting to work in every major city in Britain. There are even doubts about the costing of profitable parts: for some time the state subsidized industry to transfer some freight to the railways to ease road congestion, would this continue? Also the performance of private enterprise in rail transport is far from marvellous. The Channel Tunnel project is now costed at twice the original estimate and is running, when it is running, very late. Undoubtedly it will be finished, unlike the case for the 1970s development, as so much has already been invested (about £12 bln.) and the British are all now red-hot Europeans, we are told. But the case of the land link to London is a classic case of state interference and private unprofitability. British Rail

proposed a route to London which would have been fairly easy to build and profitable only to have the scheme turned down and a more costly and less profitable (+£500m and - £285m respectively, but these are obviously estimates) route crossing the Thames and running through East London to connect with the enormous Docklands development insisted on by the government. There were various reasons for this. It would have boosted the Docklands scheme, provided a connection with the rest of the UK and favoured an area where the triumph of Thatcherism was the greatest. The traditional port and refining industries of the area have all but disappeared (even Dagenham is a shadow of its former self) and with them the Labour powerbase. The MPs are mainly conservative or liberal democrat. But to spoil the situation there has been the collapse of the main office development at Canary Wharf which, apart from jeopardising the rail link, also means a new underground line cannot be financed. The curriculum then of private enterprise rail development is therefore very bad and the candidacy for the British Rail services doubtful.

More immediately the quality of the service since the reorganization has been criticized. There have been more serious crashes, some due to lack of investment capital but in one case at least due to the imprecise division of responsibility between business centres. What would happen if these business centres started leasing out services to operators is food for thought. On the London bus routes handed over to private operators there were races to get to the bus stop first to pick up passengers. This cannot happen without a crash on a rail line. Also if the staff are assigned to one operator, how will they be able to fill out the working time in their shifts, at present achieved by moving them from one service to another or even one route to another during the day. So it appears that what is intrinsically a network and not just a collection of routes will continue to operate as such with some of the cherries on the cake being taken by a few private operators and the rest left unwanted.

The next problem of the state in this area is the privatization of social services, above all health and education, where economic calculations tend to be vague (there is the human resources school that talks of effectiveness of investment in these sectors, but this is a limited approach) and the aims of the organizations involved are not at all clear in cost terms. (You cannot order a Nobel Prize winner from a university on the futures market or a totally fit worker from a hospital maternity ward for delivery at the age of 18.) The state has therefore aimed at a kind of efficient management approach with more public responsibility (through the so-called Citizens Charter) coupled with private tendering for parts of the activity (the head of the Adam Smith Institute, a privatization think tank, has produced a real kamasutra of such techniques numbering a total of 25!)(3). But these two tendencies clash. If the state operated systems are to be made to operate well, as the Prime Minister and the Citizens Charter insist, no one will go to private schools or

hospitals. Coupled with the recession, in fact, the improvements made (increased investment in the NHS and better salaries for teachers that persuaded many to stay on) have led to a 6% fall in private health insurance at BUPA, the biggest insurer, and a reverse in the trend that saw the percentage of children going to private schools rise from 5.8% in 1979 to 7.5% in 1991 (4). For many people therefore, the question of privatization is a secondary, confusing issue. This confusion spreads to the end to council housing through the transfer of the assets to housing associations (same people, same houses, same offices, but the debts are now 'private' and the council housing department nameplate removed). In the end we are merely playing with words and the figures on the balance sheet.

There are of course cases where the privatization at least of peripheral services used by state owned concerns has reached the level of a farce. When the IRA bombed a barracks in the south of England it was revealed that the patrolling of the area was not in the hands of the army itself, nor even the police, but of a private security firm. At least the vexed question of "Who guards the guards?" had been resolved with the curt answer: the firm that puts in the lowest bid. Secondly, British Rail found that it was cheaper to move locomotives to a maintenance depot by road rather than by rail. Unfortunately the truck carrying one such train weighing 180 tonne broke down and it was then discovered that no crane was available to lift the locomotive, no one ever having thought that a crane of such dimensions would ever be needed outside the rail system.

Perhaps the most cogent judgement on privatization can be made after examining the effect on shareholders. From a maximum of 11m shareholders in the late 80s, the figure has fallen to 9.8m (or from 25 to 22% of the British adult population). However the shareholdings in privatized companies has remained constant at 14% of adults and those with one type of share (53%) or two (19%) has not changed much. The other companies are therefore the ones to suffer from disinvestment. But if we examine the total weight of shareholdings, in 1957 2/3 were in private individual's hands, in 1990 only 1/5, the rest were in the invisible hands of institutions (investment and pension funds etc.)(5). The privatizations of the 1980s have not reversed this trend despite all the measures taken to limit the maximum holding permitted per person.

Of course the present moment is not the best to judge if the trend will continue, but all in all the triumphalism of the 1980s has passed. There remain the problems of the function of the state, which, by rolling back its boundaries has entered a no-mans land where the criterion of treating everything as an enterprise, that is, of a society modelled on the factory, has to come to terms with the reproduction of social relations, in guaranteeing to enterprises the availability of a healthy, trained and sufficiently mobile workforce (through the health, education and mass transport systems). Obviously there is the

complete absence of any discussion of the contrast between the interests of individual capitals and of capital in general, the latter being considered to be merely the sum of the former (a "What is good for Ford is good for America." approach). Instead we have the terms "public" and "private" and so the elimination of the former supposedly resolves, or better, abolishes any possible contrast between quota of capital and the general interests of the capitalist class. But these problems cannot be solved either by the state regulation of activity either directly, with state enterprise competing with private ones or, nor, as with the Conservative governments in the UK, increasingly indirectly through watchdog committees, inspectorates and charters.

That privatization is now a worldwide phenomenon from Latin America to Eastern Europe and Japan should not cause confusion over it being a success story, the panacea for all economic ills. The British programme has gone further than the others due to the length of time taken and the determination behind it, and if the ideology quoted from is often of an empirical one (the word 'privatization' did not even appear in the 1979 Conservative Party election manifesto, instead there was the catch phrase "as every housewife knows", the vulgar economics of economic agents - households, manufacturers etc.), this has only reinforced the contradictory approach to a society presented as owners of assets and producers of commodities with some exclusions). The past 5 years or so have seen an attempt to blur the class distinctions in British society, using as a lever the mass ownership of shares and, more especially housing (or at least mortgages (6)), and exemplified by the Citizens Charter and the talk of a classless society (something that should appeal to C2s as The Financial Times cynically remarked). The reduction in industrial conflict also helped in this revitalized "new realism", as well as the possibility to talk of rich and poor, thus not of class, in the wake of the creation of a nouveau riche and homeless unemployed. (The poor in Britain, the EC calculates, are the worst off in Europe after the ones of Britain's oldest ally, Portugal). The problem is, though, that Portugal is a much poorer country than the UK.)

Obviously these two subterfuges (the lack of conflict between capital in particular and in general and the classless nature of society, there are just the rich and the poor) cannot last indefinitely as they merely serve to hide the fact that questions cannot be resolved by this social regime, nor can such a regime have a consciousness of this fact and thus cannot avoid the development of conflict.

- (1) See La Repubblica (Rome) 1.5.92. A&F p.13.
- (2) See The Financial Times 20.2.92.
- (3) See Privatization by Dr. Madsen Pirie, MIT - Wildwood House, 1988. The methods listed include not only sales but also contracting out, licensing and other low profile operations.
- (4) See The Economist 6.6.92. pp.35-6.
- (5) See The Financial Times 11.3.92. p.9.
- (6) In September 1991, 67.4% of housing was owner occupied against 56% in 1980. Most of this difference (9.3%) came from the sale of state owned housing. See The Economist 20.6.92.

## CENTRAL AMERICA

### WHAT IS SOLIDARISMO? & EL SALVADOR: THE PEACE ACCORDS

In Echanges 72/73 and 74/75 we published texts about Guatemala by two American friends who have travelled much in Central America. The text in no.72/73 was from the US journal Central America and Middle East Update published in Alaska.

In this issue we publish two other articles by the same comrade from this journal's Jan. '92 and Jan. '93 issues. We will follow up in the forthcoming issues with more material from this and other journals about



Guatemala, Haiti and Argentina. Central America and Middle East Update can be contacted by writing to: ACALA, 3605 Arctic Blvd., # 1515, Anchorage, AK 99503.

The first article deals with the employer-sponsored so-called 'Solidarismo' movement existing in various Central American countries.

The second article is about the peace agreements in El Salvador. In Central America, the end of the cold war and the world economic crisis has somewhat transformed the fight between the dictatorial military regimes supported by the US and the attempt of bureaucratic reforms more or less supported by the USSR; the peasants were most of the time victims torn between the exploitation and the repression of the

revolt against their misery. The article, written after a visit to El Salvador, shows the real meaning of the 'peace agreements' signed by the guerillas and the official power.

## Central America and Middle East Update

ACALA - Alaskans Concerned about Latin America



## WHAT IS SOLIDARISMO?

by Ruth Sheridan

Today, the employer-sponsored Solidarismo is seriously challenging labor unions and the popular movement in Central America, particularly in Costa Rica and Guatemala.

Claiming to be apolitical and touting such ambiguous values as dignity, social harmony, cooperation, freedom and fraternity, the movement appeals to workers by offering housing and medical assistance, subsidized company stores and lunch programs, as well as sports and cultural activities. In a nutshell, it promotes worker-owner harmony, provides some services to workers and eliminates collective bargaining.

Each worker owns shares in the Solidarista association according to his/her contribution which can be redeemed with accrued interest and the interest from the employer's contribution when employment ends.

Although the money for the program comes from equal contributions from workers and employers, it costs employers virtually nothing since they can deduct the amount they contribute from an 8.3% payroll tax that would otherwise be placed into a workers' severance pay fund. The company, assured of labor stability, increased productivity and better worker morale at no additional cost, becomes the prime beneficiary of Solidarismo.

A Solidarista association can be started with as little as 12 employees. It is then administered by a board of directors, elected by workers. Management may have a voice on the board through an appointed proxy, but no vote. Associations may purchase company stock or create independent, worker-owned companies. So far, no association has become a controlling shareholder of a company and only a few have created spin-off businesses which are worker owned.

According to study made by the Association of Labor Promotion Services (ASEPROLA) in San Jose, Costa Rica, more than 60% of Solidarista board members are managers, technicians, supervisors or section chiefs. Only 12% are skilled workers. And, in 98% of the associations, decision making is in the hands of people very close to the employer.

Although first formulated in the 1940s in Costa Rica, the concept of Solidarismo did not make serious inroads until the 1970s. Then, backed by private sector funding and the Catholic hierarchy who actively promoted it in workshops and training sessions, it began to grow. The movement now surpasses organized labor with 200,000 members in over 2,000 associations and currently controls

about \$30 million in funds. As you may imagine, Solidarismo is a huge success with the multinationals - 90% have Solidarista associations.

In Guatemala, Solidarismo maintains a large well-staffed office with up-to-date equipment in the capital. Since the mid-80s, Solidarismo has targeted the labor union movement, managing to form associations where there were militant labor unions as early as 1983 at the La Perla coffee and cardamon plantation in the Quiche region, at the banana plantation Arizona in Izabal on the eastern coast in 1986, and the Lunafil thread factory in 1987. Solidarismo has replaced 17 unions, and in another 18 workplaces unions and Solidarista associations co-exist.

Presently, about 80,000 Guatemalan workers are in 300 Solidarista associations; 68 of them are in the industrial sector, primarily textile factories and bottling plants, while 27 are with transnational corporations. Others are in the service sector (hotels, restaurants, package tours) or agro-industry, with a small percentage in commercial and financial institutions. Guatemala's new, growing maquiladora section in the garment industry has ten associations (apparel is now Guatemala's second leading export to the U.S.).

Unlike its arch-rival, Coca Cola, the Guatemalan Pepsi plant managed to thwart a union organizing drive, offering instead a Solidarista association which is one of the few to have started two spin-off businesses - a worker run bottle washing operation and a factory that makes uniforms for the company. Profits from these operations which are worker run go into the Solidarista account.

The movement has already spread to Honduras where there are 45 associations and El Salvador which has ten. It may even penetrate into Nicaragua where two businesses have been selected as pilot projects: a Pepsi plant and the Victoria Brewery.

What happens to wages under Solidarismo? The associations do not negotiate contracts or discuss wages and working conditions with the company. There are no collective bargaining rights and no right to strike. There's only a grievance committee to resolve individual worker-management conflicts. Besides, the majority of those elected to the boards are likely to be at the supervisory or managerial level and can be expected to act as directors of the company, not as representatives of labor.

Propaganda directed to the workers has been simplistic or vague, encouraging them to

forget about the popular movement, class consciousness and collective bargaining and strive for worker-owner solidarity and a business mentality. As Rina Sanchinelli, the director of Guatemalan Solidarismo, explains it Marxism provides security and no freedom; neoliberalism provides freedom without security, while Solidarismo, a third alternative, proposes a progressive movement whose goal is to improve the economic conditions of the workers.

Theoretically Solidarismo implies a joint effort by labor and capital, but critics point out that actually all the funds for the associations come from the worker's pocket. Employer contributions are just an advance on the amount of severance pay legally owed to employees when they are laid off. There's no extra cost to the employer. Even benefits once won in collective bargaining and paid for by the employer are now covered by worker contributions to their Solidarista association.

So far, workers have not been motivated to join solidarista associations. It's an idea promoted by large corporations and transnationals, especially those that already have.

The Peace Accords specifically addressed healing and reconciliation so that the wounds of war would be opened, drained and healed. To accomplish this two commissions were created: an Ad Hoc Commission and a Truth Commission.

The Ad Hoc Commission, consisting of three respected, elderly Salvadorans, investigated the service records of some 200 officers, heard the testimony of the victims when possible, and read the data collected by the various non-governmental human rights organizations. Their findings will form the basis for purging or "purifying" the Armed Forces, particularly those who were the intellectual authors of the war crimes against the civilian population. It is estimated that more than one hundred officers will be removed or transferred, and that this will include Generals Emilio Ponce and Juan Orlando Zepeda, the Minister and Vice-Minister of Defense. The report has been prepared and presented to president Cristiani and the United Nations. It will not be made public. However, much of the information is already known in El Salvador.

The Truth Commission, appointed and funded by the United Nations, also has three distinguished members, one of whom is Thomas Buergenthal, a U.S. expert on human rights.

They are investigating the 1981 massacre at El Mozote in which five villages were attacked and more than 1,000 - mostly women, infants and children - were killed. Miraculously, one woman survived. Rufina Amaya hid in the bushes and when the horror subsided she fled to Honduras, stayed in the refugee camp at Colomoncagua and then returned in 1989 during the relocation. She went to the offices of Tutela Legal, the Catholic Human Rights Commission, and told them what she had witnessed. Tutela Legal asked for a special exhumation team which has already identified 119 bodies in the convent of Hermita, one of the destroyed villages.

For years, no officials in either El Salvador or the U.S. would believe Rufina's story. Now, with the exhumations, it can no longer be denied. Even if the costly work of exhumation is discontinued, enough evidence has been uncovered to implicate and disband the Atlacatl Battalion. This notorious outfit, created that same year and trained in the U.S., was proven to be responsible for the massacre.

The full report of the Truth Commission will not be given until January or February and it will be public information. When presented, it will include the facts about two other massacres - at the Rio Sumpul and the Rio Lempa - and it will name those who ordered the murder of Archbishop Romero and the killing of the Jesuits.

At our various meetings we were frequently reminded that we were witnessing an historic moment in El Salvador. Dec. 15 marked the first anniversary of the Peace Accords that with the help of the United Nations had been carefully crafted. All the parties who signed were expected to comply with their obligations to the letter so that if the FMLN complied, the Armed Forces must also.

The agreement specified that the FMLN would completely demilitarize and destroy its weapons. It also stated that the Armed Forces would be significantly reduced and that it would lose its impunity.

For at least six weeks feelings had been intense and delays mounted. The FMLN refused to disband; hardliners in the military threatened a coup. The president caved in and offered to suspend the purging and reduction of the armed forces. Definitely, the peace process had reached the point where, as one speaker aptly described it, they were "touching the idol". For years the military had controlled the president. Now, the situation had changed.

The United States held firm, still supporting the negotiated settlement, and the United Nations team was present to adjudicate disputes. Under these circumstances, Cristiani no longer had the power to protect the generals. Up to this crucial point, the right wing of the military may have convinced themselves that only the FMLN, the rebels, needed to disband and that they, the invincibles, would be kept in power despite the overwhelming evidence against them. After all, the lies and cover-ups had worked before.

Everyone breathed easier when on Dec. 2 the press announced that the FMLN would destroy its weapons and disband the fourth 20% of its combatants. Shortly after, the government let it be known that the Atlacatl Battalion would also disband.

The Peace Accords were again on track. A national holiday was declared on Dec. 15 with the same pealing of bells and celebrating that greeted the signing of the agreement last year. Reportedly, there were two separate celebrations (similar to last year) one by the government; the other by the FMLN. Vice-president Dan Quayle was on hand at the government celebration to announce that the U.S. would forgive \$446 million (75%) of El Salvador's war debt.

We were advised that the situation would remain critical at least until mid-January when the Armed Forces are purged.

And, we were asked to remember the people of El Salvador, to keep them and their struggle in our hearts. With them, we dare to hope that truth and justice will prevail and that there will be an opening toward real democracy with the approaching 1994 elections.



## FRANCE

### CLASS STRUGGLE 1990-93

*In Echanges no. 72/73 we published an article on the coordinating committees in France and another article analysing the tendencies of the class struggle at the beginning of the 90s. Below we publish a number of articles which, together with the material on the '91 air traffic control technicians strike and the closure of the Renault Billancourt factory already published in no. 70/71 are either complements to or continues the analysis of the articles in no. 72/73.*



**SOME STRUGGLES IN THE HEALTH SECTOR.** *The first article, STRUGGLES IN THE HOSPITALS, concerns developments and struggles in the hospitals in '90 and '91, mainly of nurses but also of other workers facing the restructuring in the health service. In previous issues of Echanges we have had material on health sector struggles from the end of the 80's in countries like Germany, Holland, Canada and England, seeing among other things interesting, but varying, levels of selforganisation. The second article, THE STRUGGLE OF THE 'ASSISTANCES SOCIALES', concerns the struggles of a group*

*in the health sector whose struggle took similar forms to the massive mobilisation and organisation forms of the nurses' mobilisation and coordinating committee in 1988.*

**THE 1991 ACTION IN THE RENAULT FACTORIES-CLASS STRUGGLE AND THE VULNERABILITY OF 'JUST-IN-TIME' PRODUCTION.** *Apart from analysing the Renault strike in general, this article points in particular to the weaknesses of the 'zero stock' and 'just-in-time' production methods, how the success of Renault (and other companies) in reducing factory stocks to a minimum level creates a new vulnerability enabling small groups of workers to stop most of the factories of a company, even in other countries.*

**THE RISE OF VIOLENCE IN THE STRUGGLES. DOCKERS AND POST WORKERS STRUGGLES.** *This article points out a general rise of violence in workers' struggles in France, briefly mentions some of these strikes, and also deals with struggles among dockers and post workers.*

**THE TRUCK DRIVERS' ACTIONS, SUMMER 92 - ONCE AGAIN CLASS STRUGGLE SHOWS THE VULNERABILITY OF CAPITAL.** *With increased competition and the introduction of 'just-in-time', 'zero-stock' and other concepts in industry and distribution, the transport sector both plays an important role and is deeply affected. On one hand the transport sector is central in achieving the smooth operation by delivering goods, spare parts, etc. on time, and because of this, conflicts in the transport sector quickly and deeply affect other parts of the economy and disturb the production process and the capitalist accumulation process in the same way as - but often on a much larger scale - than conflicts at a certain factory affecting other factories of the same industrial group or depending on deliveries from it. On the other hand*

the sector becomes closely linked with industry, obliged to adhere to strict time limits concerning delivery time, one could almost say becoming an appendage to or prolongation of the assembly line, with important effects on the companies and the drivers' working conditions. The French truckers 'wildcat' actions in the summer of '92 strongly affected industry and distribution both in France and in neighbouring countries.

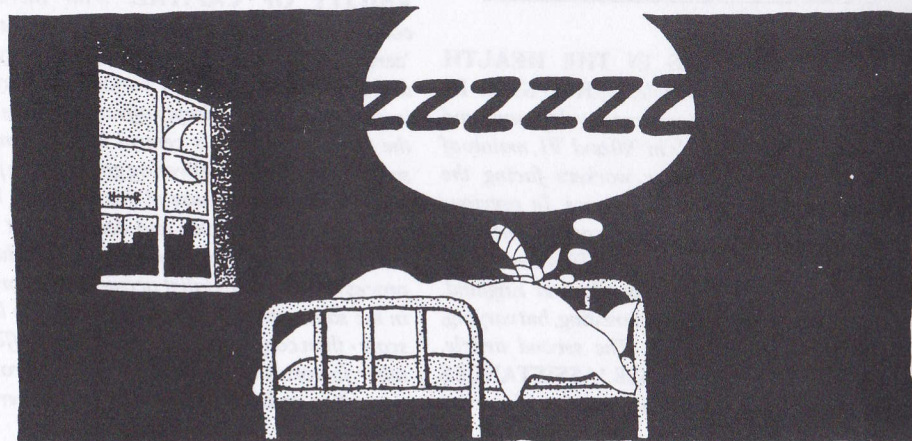
**THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE CLASS STRUGGLE 1991 - AUTUMN 1993.** This article links up directly with the previous article on class struggle in France in 1990 and analysis further the tendencies in the class struggle after that period.

This collection of articles is put together to provide a dossier on class struggle in France after '90, but was originally written at different periods and appeared in various French edition of Echanges. In connection with the English translations we have also gone through and discussed various points in the articles again and made some changes and precisions many places and some places slightly updated the original articles. Since they

were written on various occasions there are some repetitions and overlapping in this material concerning some of the struggles - this we haven't bothered to do something with. Various supplementary material has also been added, like extracts from letters to various contacts and extracts from our French bulletin *Dans le monde une classe en lutte*. We can only mention a small part of the conflicts - the number is very big, about much of them we have very little information and there is certainly conflicts we don't know about.

This material ends with the Autumn of 1993. For the period which followed, we have another dossier of material available, covering numerous small conflicts as well as the Air France actions at the end of '93, the big demonstration against the private schools in January '94 and the widespread actions of school pupils, students and youth in the months after against the plans to introduce a special minimum wage for youth. All this will follow in a forthcoming issue of Echanges.

RH



## SOME STRUGGLES IN THE HEALTH SOCIAL SECTOR

### STRUGGLES IN THE HOSPITALS

**The hospital reform and the working conditions**  
This reform was adopted by the parliament in July 1991 and attempted a complete restructuring of hospitals all over France. The two main tendencies of this reform was:

- Increase productivity: every hospital will have to demonstrate its "productivity" in order not to be closed.

- More autonomous management by decentralising the means: every hospital will receive an annual lump sum of money when it has presented a management 'project' and then has signed a 'contract' on this basis with the state. The managing of the hospitals will be completely computerised.

This reform foresees the elimination of 60,000 beds all over France, the closure of "non profitable" sections, small local country hospitals and some

psychiatric hospitals, and in the big cities the centralisation of hospitals (fewer but bigger hospitals). The consequence of this reform will be an increase in the distance between the hospital and the patients, who will have sometimes to drive 50 or 100 km longer to get to the nearest hospital.

Since 1988 hospital managements have already proceeded along the lines of this reform, and the nurses complain about their work becoming harder and harder. Their working conditions have degraded: more work to do, more 'flexible' work schedule/timetable (a compulsory flexibility where management can ask you to come to work at any time), no replacement when a nurse is on leave (due to pregnancy, illness, retraining...), flexibility of jobs, more frequent overtime, rules about days off constantly pushed aside (difficult to get days off from work which you are entitled to), working day stretched till 10 hours, sometimes 12. Fixed shift patterns are constantly broken, changing from 8 hours work to 10 or 12 hours.

In 3 years, nearly 10,000 nurses have left the public hospitals for the private sector ones, 2,000 jobs are vacant in the hospitals. Nurses leaving are not replaced. (There are 40,000 nurses in the private health system.)

**Strikes in the hospitals**

Actions took place throughout 1990 and 1991.

**In 1990**

From 7. June to August 1990, for around 10 weeks, **clerks and some categories of workers** are on strike in the public hospitals in Paris. (In total there are 8,000 clerks and 5,000 workers.)

- They act changes in their status foreseen in the hospital reform, which will remove some benefits. They claim a wage rise corresponding to the workload increase and a wider range of tasks.

- The clerks' strike blocked the finances of the hospitals, stopped the collecting of fees, patients didn't pay when leaving the hospital... According to management this strike affected 10 to 15% of the usual fees, 40% according to the strikers.

- The strike is not evenly followed and affects 25 public hospitals in the Paris region. In the hospital R. Debré 100% of the staff concerned is on strike.

- The strike is coordinated by a special committee, more or less supported by the unions.

From June to September 1990: **The laundry workers** are on strike. (They are 600 in all the Paris hospitals.)

The strike starts end of June, supported by the CGT union, against the same change of status which remove the right to retirement at the age of 55.

- The hospitals have to call private laundry companies, in August the workers block entrances to the laundries, but they are opened again as the CGT union obliges them to clear the doors.

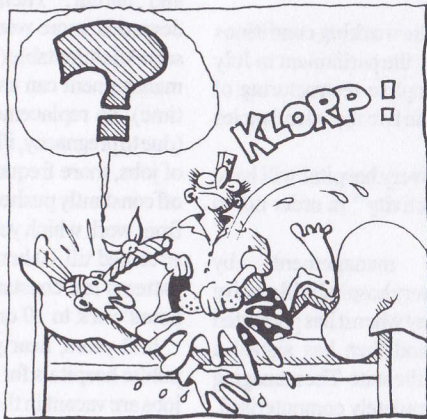
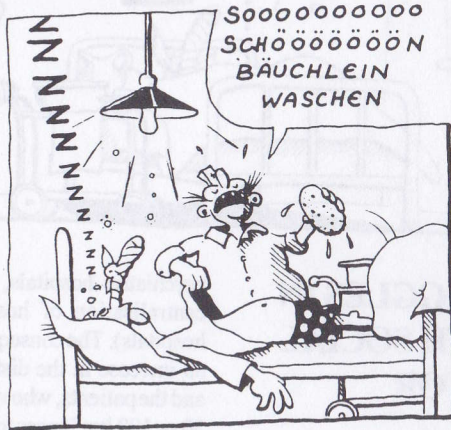
- The strike becomes weaker and weaker and ends on 20. September. According to management, the retirement age will not be touched and the laundry workers will become 'professionals' with a monthly wage increase of 400 to 800 Francs.

**In 1991**

From May to June 1991 the **anaesthetic nurses and doctors** are on strike. In total they are 7.415 doctors and 4.500 nurses. These nurses already striked in 1988 (before the great nurses' movement of that year) in an autonomous strike with the formation of a special coordinating committee. Now they claim a special recognition of their two years specific training after having got their nurses degree and a specific grade for it in the wages structure.

For 5 weeks nurses, together with the doctors, refused to do the normal work and only took care of emergencies. About 75% of the doctors are on strike over the payment for the time they are obliged to stay in the hospital, and between 40 and 80% of the nurses are on strike over

this question of their status. On 19. June, the government agrees to give the doctors what they ask for, but nothing to the



nurses, who decide to go ahead with their action. On 21. June a general assembly of 250 delegates of 58 hospitals who meet in Paris decides to stop the movement, even if they have achieved practically nothing, only some slight changes in their salary (not taken into account in the basis of their retirement benefit).

Parallèll with the actions of the nurses, movements of **various categories of hospital workers** are taking place during 1991, affecting more or less hard the hospitals in Paris and the province. These actions (petitions, leafletting, general assemblies, delegations, etc...) are against the degradation of the working conditions and the shortage of staff. This situation culminates in the Autumn of '91 with quite a lot of movements, which however don't rise to the level of the big 1988 movements. Despite the deep discontent there are quite a lot of important divisions - the situation varies a lot from hospital to hospital. Not only the various unions born from the splits of the 1988 coordinating committee strengthen these divisions, but the government also plays with such divisions and manoeuvres by

conceding special benefits to some categories but not to others. The situation remained very chaotic; the actions

were not general but only limited, doing only emergency services, strike for one hour a day, for some days... It was only in Toulouse (to our knowledge) that the strike was complete during

one week in some clinics (see below). Some examples among many others:

- Belfort: Strike against the shortage of staff in the hospital. End of April limited strike and demonstration; 14. and 16. May one hour strike and demonstration; 17. May general assembly.
- Rennes: One day strike in several hospitals in May.
- Lyon: Strike against the shortage of staff in June at the Ed. Herriot

hospital. But the strike is a symbolic one because the nurses are placed under 'compulsory duty' to work. (This is a law giving public authorities the right to compel certain categories of public sector workers to work under the threat to be sacked or even sentenced.)

- Grenoble, Limoges and Rouen have similar movements.

- Paris: The Tenon hospital is on strike from April to June 91. To compensate for the lack of nurses, management took two nurses and an helper and placed them on night shift.

From 8. April a strike starts to demand the reinstatement of the three employees on the day shift again and to protest against the imposed





'flexibility' in the work schedule due to the shortage of staff. The strike lasts two months with a strike committee (the CGT and CRC unions participate in it). Only a minimum service is worked. The strike ends with the reintegration of the three employees in the day shift, but lose a lot of their wages for this period. The other hospitals in Paris are under the same threat.

**The strike in Autumn 91**

On 26. September, a big demonstration is organised against the working conditions by all the health service unions.

The nurses' coordinating committee from the movements of 1988 has given birth to three new unions:

- CNI (Coordination Nationale Infirmière - National coordination of nurses) has taken the name and the claims of the old coordinating committee and is only nurses.
- UIF (Union Infirmière de France - Nurses union

of France): Strictly for nurses also, but with far less members and close to the socialist party.

- CRC santé: Expelled from the CFDT union federation in 1989, regroups different categories of health workers.

An inter-hospital committee exists for the Paris district (30 hospitals have delegates on it). The initial core of this committee was the Tenon hospital committee, the CRC santé and some non-unionised hospital workers. The committee tries to coordinate all the movements in the hospitals.(1)

Demonstrations take place once or twice a week in October, called by the new unions, the CGT and the inter-hospital committee. They only number some thousands up to 30,000 demonstrators, as many

behind the CNI as behind the inter-hospital committee.

At the beginning of November, strikes and



demonstrations become less and less important, and only some hundreds take part in the demonstrations. A permanent sit-in goes ahead in the street in front of the gates of the Health Ministry.

The CGT, having understood the lesson of 1988 when it was left behind the movement, supported the CNI action when it started and participated in the inter-hospital committee. The CGT tries to be present everywhere. But, everywhere also, following its usual practice, it tries to do everything to avoid that the movement spread and builds autonomous structures which could escape its influence (it doesn't carry out decisions, refusal to be part of a proposed national committee ...).



**Result of the negotiations**

Nine unions, but not the inter-hospital committee, are part of the negotiating committee. An agreement is signed on 15. November by the CFDT, CFDC and CGC unions. The CGT, FO, CRC, CNI and UIF reject the agreement.

The health ministry only agreed to the following nurses:

- To increase a special monthly benefit by 150 francs for the ordinary nurses.
- 400 to 600 francs increase in this benefit for the upper grades of nurses (supervisors).
- To increase the special benefits for night shifts and bank holidays.
- Creation of 5.500 new jobs up to 1993 (but already foreseeing that it will be difficult to recruit candidates to take these new jobs).
- To reduce the night shift time to 35 hours a week by 1993.

All these measures will cost 2,2 billions francs till the end of '93. The most important claims are not met at all: nothing on the working conditions

and the shortage of staff as a consequence of the implementing of the reform which will go ahead without being changed.

**The Toulouse strike**

The strike starts in the private sector clinics after the movement stops in the public hospitals and the demonstrations are over. A clinic is closed on 12. November 91 when 100% of the staff goes on strike, and in the most important clinic of the town 6 wards out of 15 are closed. The doctors are obliged to perform the work of the nurses or patients are transferred to the public hospitals. 500 nurses and helpers ('aides soignantes') (out of 2,000) hold a general assembly every day and vote to maintain a 'hard strike' even when threatened to be placed on 'compulsory duty'. The other staff are not on strike. Only the CNI supports the strike.

The strikers aim at getting the same wages and holidays as in the public hospitals. The wage difference is 900F monthly for a beginner nurse and 1000 francs for the helpers and they have less of other benefits: the 12 special day of leave for sick children and the benefits for night or sunday shifts in the public hospitals doesn't exist in the private ones. The local discussions give nothing. At the same time discussions between bosses and unions are taking place in Paris in order to settle a new collective contract for the private hospitals: An agreement is settled on 20. November giving the nurses: - 12 days leave for sick children. - Night shift benefit of 68 francs and for Sunday shift 99 francs. - Seniority being recognised when changing job from a private to a public hospital (already demanded during the 1988 movement). - Special benefits integrated in the basic wage of 300 francs for nurses, 200 francs for helpers and 100 francs for the other workers. After a vote a resumption of work is decided in Toulouse.

AS

**Notes**

(1) In *Echanges* no. 61 and 65 we published articles on the independent movement of the Dutch nurses in 1989 and 1990. In Holland a similar development took place after the movement ended, with the transformation of struggle organisations into various kinds of unions, of course not at all leading to an increased militancy or better conditions for the workers.

## THE STRUGGLE OF THE 'ASSISTANTES SOCIALES'

We have used the French name for these very specific workers whose job is to "help" people with any problem in their life, from health to financial difficulties, from distressed individuals to family problems, giving advices or intervening in any situation, but actually having no other power or means than to refer or introduce people to any kind of organisation able to bring the real help. In the text we will refer to them as AS.

The A.S. movement developed for two months in the Autumn of 1991, at the same time as but independently from the nurses' movement. Their movement could be compared to the nurses' movement of 1988, considering the nature of their claims (wages, status), their massive involvement and the form of organisation of their strike: a coordinating committee comparable to the nurses committee of '88.

**The working conditions of the A.S.**  
There are 35.000 A.S. all over France. They are employed by a wide range of employers (we can number at less 15 different ones): the state, councils (town, district, regional), associations, the education ministry, semi-public or private firms. Therefore they are very scattered, often alone of their kind, all over France.

The beginner wage is 5,700 francs net a month,

a bit more than the legal minimum wage. For several years they have claimed the recognition of their three years studies after the baccalaureat, while the ministry only recognise two years: their wage correspond only to the level bac + 2 and not to the bac + 3 which they claim.

Their working conditions have become worse and worse with the unemployment increase during the last years. Papers write about "A.S. on the verge of a nervous breakdown". Their workload also increase due to all the posts which are not filled. More and more A.S. seek to leave their

profession. The A.S. schools has seen their budgets diminish. The working conditions vary much from one place to another. The most numerous and worst paid A.S. are those working for the councils (15,000), and their situation has worsened considerably since the decentralisation of 1984.

It is attempted to impose on them more flexibility in their working time, to be present in the week end, even the night, without extra payment.

### Their struggle

It started with a strong mobilisation in March 1990. For the first time

the A.S. took to the streets, called by an action committee. In November '90 district collectives regrouped in a national coordinating committee, called CONCASS, covering 40 districts. CONCASS was practically organised by non-unionised A.S. The CGT, CRC Santé and certain locals of FO and CFDT participated in it. Two

national demonstrations were organised in December '90 and February '91, accompanied by strikes the same days followed by between 50 and 90% of the A.S.

The coordinating committee, considering the size of these demonstrations, calls for a strike from 16. September '91. The mobilisation is very strong in the Paris district but little by little spread all over the country. Some sectors will be on total strike for almost two months. The loss of wages is considerable (some A.S. did not get any pay for the whole of October 91).

When the strike was at its highest, the collectives existed in 87 districts out of 101 and the general assemblies of the coordinating committee regularly gathered between 200 and 700 delegates coming from around 60 districts. 10,000 A.S. take part in the October demonstrations - one third of all the A.S.. It is the first time that such a mobilisation has taken place in this profession which traditionally was a kind of apostleship (formerly many of them were nuns). From 10. October they organised a permanent sit-in with tents in a square of Paris close to the seat of the government.

As the government still refused to negotiate, the movement weakened from the beginning of November. But they are still almost 2,000 when blocking the high-speed train TGV in the Montparnasse station from 15 o'clock up to midnight on 7. November. They organised a sit-in in the Paris Opera 14. November. The silence of the media and the stubborn position of the government push them to organise such spectacular actions. A general assembly 15. November voted for the resumption of work without having achieved anything concerning their claims (recognition of their education, net salary of 10,000 francs pr. month...).

### The negotiations

The coordinating committee never succeed to be received by some authority willing to discuss with them. Its delegates were sent from ministry to ministry, then to the regional districts. Nobody wanted to negotiate with a "non-legal" committee. The government didn't want to give in to any of the claims. A general reform concerning the status of all 'medico-social' workers (A.S., teachers and others) is to be negotiated with the unions - in secrecy. A delegation of the coordinating committee is received by a mediator on 23. October.

An agreement is signed at the beginning of December with the CFDT, FEN (a teachers union) and CFTC, but not at all agreed by the coordinating committee. The government gives 20 million francs to the A.S. schools and an increase of the grants for the A.S. students. Nothing at all concerning the claims of the A.S.

AS

**SANS STATUT  
MAL TRAITES  
COORDINATION - NATIONALE  
AS - ASH**



## THE 1991 ACTION IN THE RENAULT FACTORIES CLASS STRUGGLE AND THE VULNERABILITY OF 'JUST-IN-TIME' PRODUCTION

*In the 80s Renault reduced its workforce by one third. Rationalising has continued in the 90s with a planned reduction of another 40% of the jobs. Wages are not rising and bonuses are reduced, leading to growing discontent among the workers. The strike in October and November 1991 showed the vulnerability of the new Just-in-Time production concept, since mass pickets blocking the factory gates at the Cléon factory prevented trucks from bringing parts to other factories and thus stopped*

*production at the other factories of the Renault group. A police intervention finally opens up a clean way out for everybody involved, except for the workers who gained very little.*

### BACKGROUND

Most of the Renault factories are located within a radius of 200 km west and north of Paris. Instead of large factories with 30 or 40.000 workers, it's now production units with 5 to 7.000 workers. At the end of 1983 the Renault group had 214.000 employees, at the end of 1989 not more than 160.000. Management plans to continue rationalisation and reduce the number of jobs with 40% the years following 1991.

Wages at Renault are still 10% above the

Peugeot-Citroen group, but this is estimated average wages and must be viewed with some caution. The last years wage increases were very small. According to the CGT union, the purchasing power of a Renault worker has been reduced by 17% since 1983. A bonus system complicates the wages question. The bonus was previously paid 4 times a year and amounted annually to around 2 monthly salaries. Now it has been replaced by a yearly bonus, paid in July, based on the profit of each of the factories and whose size therefore varies from factory to factory. With the reduction in Renault's profits this bonus was reduced from 4800 francs (approximately 800\$/600£) in 1989 to 1500 francs in 1990 at the Cléon factory. Another productivity bonus is only 654 francs at Cléon, but 1219 francs in average for the whole Renault group and in the Le Mans factory as high as 2695 francs. These bonus questions will to a large extent be the detonators of the 1991 strike.

At the end of 1989 all the unions - CFDT, FO, CGC, CFTC - with the exception of CGT signed an agreement with Renault in connection with the closure of the Billancourt factory (see *Echanges* 70/71). This agreement was extended until March 1991 by the same unions to provide new jobs for the Billancourt workers about to be made redundant. In this period the same unions also signed an agreement on the introduction of a third shift at the Flins factory and they renew the 'social agreement' (*accord social*) with the company. This agreement confirms a "consensus on the principles of competitiveness and modernisation" and it is accompanied by an agreement about a variable bonus according to the result of each factory. A 'professionalisation plan' is also foreseen for the 25.000 unskilled workers (5.000 of them illiterates) who risk to be made redundant in the near future, but without a guarantee about future employment.

In the *comité d'entreprise* (legal elected factory committees) elections of the Renault group in June '91, the CGT loses the majority on the *comité central d'entreprise* (central committee for the whole Renault group) which it had had since 1946.

The new majority is constituted by the same unions who signed the above mentioned agreements, and according to the new secretary (from the CFDT) of the committee, this signifies the beginning of a 'responsible unionism'. This new conception of unionism is linked to the new methods of production.

To be able to confront the international competition, especially from Japan, Renault has introduced "Just-In-Time" (JIT) production to minimize time and costs associated with factory stocks. From 1989 to 1990 the average storage time for parts was reduced from 14,4 to 5,8 days. However, to a larger extent than its Japanese competitors Renault is dependent on its own production of parts - especially of engines and gearboxes which mainly are produced in one factory: Cléon. 50% of the parts are supplied by sub-contractors (which could be numerous to ensure uninterrupted deliveries and upon which Renault can impose strict conditions); the Japanese companies are only dependent of their own factories for 30 to 40% of the parts. Another essential element of this management policy is to maintain social peace due to the vulnerability of the modern systems of production, where one factory, or a small group of workers of a factory, quickly can bring all or most of the factories of a company to a standstill. This is what happened during the English Ford strike Spring 1988 (see *Echanges* no. 59, special issue on *Strikes in the UK car industry 1987-90*) and it is also precisely what happens at Cléon.

### HOW THE STRIKE STARTED AT CLÉON

In the same way as during the Peugeot strike in 1989 (see *Echanges* no. 62), employers and government voiced strong criticism of the "backward" management methods at Cléon. Others found in this strike proof that the CGT had reverted to a 'class struggle' policy to regain the terrain it had lost. However, such explanations are

Daily deliveries of engines and gearboxes from Cléon to other assembly factories



far away from the real causes of the conflict: The wage freeze which was partially imposed by the government, the uncertainty of employment caused by previous and planned job reductions, the reduction of the 'profit bonus' (most strongly felt at Cléon which had the strongest reduction: 3300 francs) - all this was sufficient to generate discontent. The fact that certain Renault models are selling well, leading to the hiring of 200 temporary workers, can only encourage a strike action. On July 4, just before the Summer holiday, 2.000 workers (out of 4.000) participate in a limited strike called by CGT and CFDT.

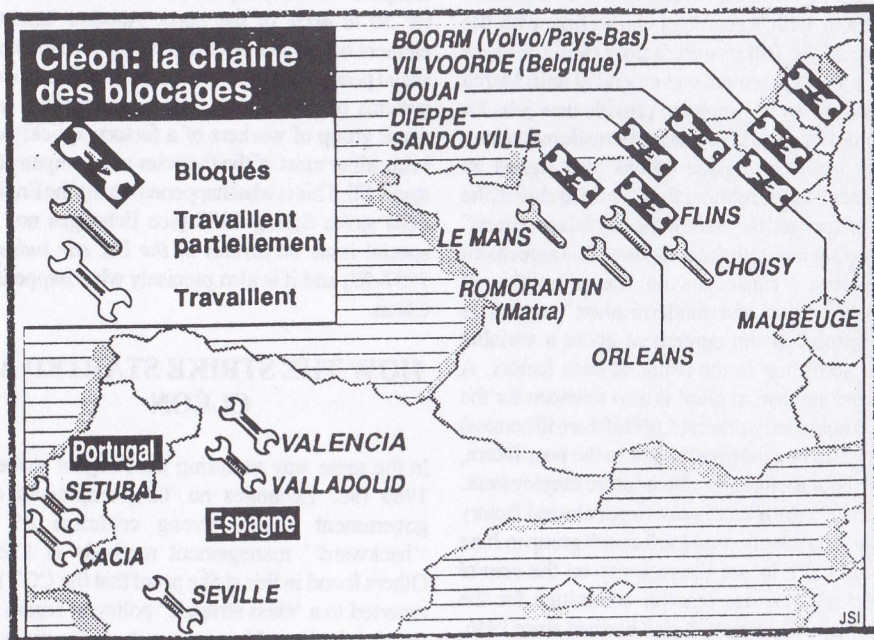
*the beginning of the conflict it was the workers who pushed the unions, not the other way around.* In September the same unions are pressed by the rank and file and they organise new limited work stoppages: 1 1/2 hour on 25.9 at Cléon, again with 2000 workers participating, and at Sandouville and Le Mans. But on 27.9 the CGT cartel for the Renault factories refused to issue an appeal for a strike throughout the Renault group. In the beginning of October the short strikes continue, but very patchy: at Cléon 3/10, at Le Mans 1/10, and 4/10 at Sandouville where the following Saturday is worked to compensate for the strike day. On 11.10 at Cléon only 1.000 workers down tools. On 15.10 at Le Mans 700

**'Challenge of '90s'**  
**Renault Strike Shows**  
**The Need to Transform**  
**Relations With Labor**

To Compete With Japanese,  
 Europeans Have to Learn  
 To Cooperate in Factories  
 Of Disruptions and Disasters

As *Le Monde* later will write in November: At

Cléon: the chain of blockades



workers strike and the factory gates are blocked for a short time - this is repeated the following day, but the inter-union committee suspend the action. On 17.10 at Flins 900 out of 9.000 workers strike for 2 hours.

It is only at Cléon that almost all the workers (4.600) participate in the strike which starts for higher wages and an immediate opening of negotiations. This is not so much because of the presence of trotskyist militants in the leadership of the factory branch of the CGT (which at Cléon receives 80% of the votes of the workers), but rather due to the specific conditions in this factory. The strike at Cléon starts in the night between 16. and 17.10 and has to be decided upon again by a vote at the beginning of each shift. The factory gates are blocked for lorries, but not for the non-strikers. According to Louis Vianet, no. 2 in the national leadership of the CGT, the Cléon strike is only part of a preparation for a national day of action 24.10 which amongst others will affect all the Renault factories.

It is difficult to say how the strike at Cléon evolved from short limited strikes, less and less followed by the



workers - into a total strike which is reaffirmed every day by the assemblies of workers, without a strike committee, and quickly taking a hard stance by blocking all lorries and preventing all parts (engines and gearboxes) to be transported to other Renault factories. The non-strikers are allowed to enter the factory, but they are so few that practically nothing is produced. Management acknowledges the scope of the conflict, because on Monday 21.10 they get

a court injunction where 9 CGT delegates are obliged within 24 hours to ensure free access to the factory, with the threat of police intervention if necessary.

**CLÉON REMAINS ON STRIKE -**  
**THE OTHER FACTORIES AT**  
**STANDSTILL**

One after another the other Renault factories in France and Belgium, and the Volvo factory in Holland (which receives engines from Cléon), are affected by the strike at Cléon. The subcontractors must reduce their production and lay off workers. During this week the situation in the other factories is unclear. On one hand there are work stoppages as part of the CGT's national action, on the other hand there are layoffs due to the lack of parts. The situation is also unclear at Le Mans even if this factory (due to its specific production) is not affected by the Cléon strike; the short rotating strikes which tended to generalise are stopped by the unions, which only want to relaunch them again when they are in control of the situation.

On 28.10 the situation is clearer: Only Cléon is on strike, the others are working or are at standstill due to a lack of parts. This situation is similar to the SNECMA strike in 1988 (see *Echanges* no. 66/67, p.60) or the Peugeot strike in 1989. Apparently there is no solidarity from the other Renault factories, but the majority of them are already at a standstill even without a strike. There are discussions in the papers about the effective number of strikers at Cléon. But it is evident that the strike can last only because of a strong participation of the workers in the strike pickets who occupy the factory gates day and night (more than 200 workers all the time, divided in 9 pickets with around 20 workers in each), a strong determination (no lorries will pass until the police later intervenes) and because management fails in its attempt to win the workers at Cléon and other factories over to their side.



The strike committee - that is in fact the permanent assembly in front of the factory gates which is growing at every change of shift and where exchange of information and organisation of the strike takes place. The most important picket is in front of the main entrance. During a day numerous meetings take place here discussing the organisation of the strike. *Noone is able to establish how many workers that are on strike*, a journalist writes on 30.10., but everybody can see that no parts are leaving the factory - not only because the gates are blocked, but because noone really works. Daily demonstrations inside the factory shows that noone is actually working even if anybody can cross the picketline - something which however is not an easy thing to do due to the reactions of the strikers.

## THE ISOLATION OF THE STRIKE

As rumours about police intervention become more widespread at the end of October, disagreements emerge between the unions and a part of the most active rank and file workers. During the night between Monday and Tuesday 29.10., a group of workers get hold of fire extinguishing equipment from the factory to use for the defence of the factory gates. However, the local CGT officials of the factory seize this equipment and thereby weakens this defence. Other events show that the struggle partly escapes union control. For example, the cars of non-strikers are being chased by strikers who sometimes are masked with balaclava, sometimes not masked at all. The top management organises a demonstration of managerial staff at all levels, which is roughly stopped by the strikers at the factory gates. When the same kind of staff try to collect signatures against the strike in the parking areas of supermarkets, they are physically attacked by strikers. The CFDT and FO condemn these actions.

It is clear that this increase in violence is caused by the feeling that the action is going nowhere and that something needs to be done to get out of the deadlock. There is little hope for any kind of active

solidarity from the other Renault factories. The CGT delegate at Le Mans clearly declared: *We support the claims of the Cléon strikers. But for the moment it is out of the question for us to start similar actions.*

Unions and government choose this very moment to start negotiations with the aim of ending to the conflict. On 30.10 the government appoints a kind mediator, the labour minister makes it clear that *at the same time the right to work will be enforced and then negotiations will start.* Renault management agrees to open negotiations about *financial benefits which in a better way will compensate the efforts of the workforce, to reorganise the working conditions and the grading structure, and to study how the days of lost production can be recovered* and also the problems posed by the sanctions it has imposed (10 workers had been fired because of acts they have been engaged in during the strike). The CFDT declares its agreement with these proposals. The CGT concludes that it is not a defeat and that it *permits the establishment of a framework for discussion.* In spite of, or maybe precisely because of, such excuses from the unions, the mass meeting called for 1.11 refuses to give up the strike weapon, the pickets and the blocking of the gates.

The same situation continues for several days with backdoor negotiations between management and CGT officials and from which the outside world only hears vague formulations like: no sanctions, goodwill, offers of 'interesting' bonuses and that 'expectations are high'. But the pickets remain as strong as ever in front of the gates and practically nobody works. Faced with this situation the CFDT and CGC propose to arrange a vote with the aim of setting the strikers up against the passive mass of non-production workers.

## THE POLICE OPEN A WAY OUT FOR THE UNIONS

An important event will untie the situation and force the government to use the police, something

which it until now has been unwilling to do out of fear of an extension of the conflict. On 4.11 the Le Mans workers go on strike and block the factory gates. Here it appears that the pressure of the rank and file finally has obliged the unions to drop their excuses, maybe because they believe that the Cléon conflict is approaching the end. The unlimited strike at Le Mans is decided after a strike call from the CFDT and CGT and at the end of the first day the offices of the *comité d'entreprise* are occupied. The strikers even weld the factory gates, but open them up later on after the intervention of the union officials.

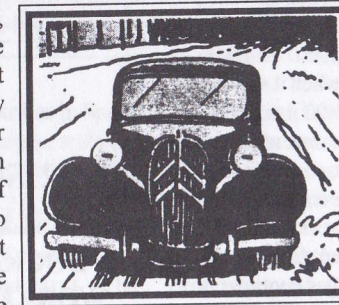
It is necessary to act urgently because of this extension of the conflict. On the twentieth day of the strikes, Tuesday 5/11 at 3.30 in the morning, almost 500 CRS (riot police) clear the Cléon factory gates. In accordance with their previous declarations, the union officials order the couple of hundred strikers present to evacuate the gates without resisting. The officials were probably informed about the police intervention on beforehand (one can even assume that a 'plan' to 'end' the strike was elaborated during the discussions with management), because earlier this night the officials had asked the strikers to collect and remove all their belongings (allegedly to protect it).

At 6 o'clock almost 1.000 workers force their way through the gates and walk around in the factory to establish that only a dozen of workers have resumed work. But the lorries are already removing the stocks and bringing parts to the other factories to allow their assembly lines operate again. At 8.30 management and unions announce that negotiations have resumed. The police intervention is convenient for management, government and unions and it has without doubt been planned to allow the unions to withdraw 'with honour' from a strike they haven't wanted

anyway. The losers are the workers who have been on strike for three weeks, and who anyway don't resume work at once even if they know that they have abandoned their most important weapon. At this moment, because he knows that quite a lot of rank and file workers want to continue the strike, Vianet from the CGT national leadership announces that he will come to Cléon on Thursday 7.11. Since the beginning of the strike none of the national leaders of the CGT or of its metal workers union came to the factory.

While the negotiations, with calculated 'leaks', continue the following days, only the non-production employees resume work. Every day more than 1.000 workers march through the factory and only between 10 and 15% of the production workers have returned to the assembly lines - an insufficient number to start up the lines again.

In the night of 6.11, after 19 hours of negotiation, the following offer is presented:  
- A 224 francs per month bonus (a combination of several



previous bonuses)

-A special bonus of 1.000 francs said to be retroactive, but in reality a bonus for ending the strike

-The sanctions are abandoned: 6 firings and 8 unlimited layoffs are changed to suspensions from 5 to 20 days for those accused of 'malicious behaviour'

-A new grading structure with less grades, which also allows further individual upgrading locally  
-Voluntary extra work on Saturday 9.11 and Monday 11.11 (a Bank holiday) to compensate for the lost wages during the strike.

This proposal is accompanied by an ultimatum: The workers have 18 hours to accept it.

In front of a mass meeting which must make the decision, a CGT delegate reveals his true colour: *To vote against a resumption of work means*

*dismissals*. The CGT leader Vianet faced a growing tumult when he also spoke in favour of the proposal. The vote is organised in a hurry even if only a part of the workers are present. 1.524 participate - 807 is vote in favour of continuing the strike and 717 against. The union officials are stunned. The time is 17.45.

The unions, especially the CGT, give themselves

some *time to think and to consult their militants*. How can they escape this situation and still fulfill their obligation to ensure a resumption of work, which they without doubt have pledged themselves to in the discussions with management? At 20.00 the CGT is booed by the assembly when it appeals for a resumption of work and at 21.00 it signs the agreement. The strike is practically over at Cléon, but limited strikes continue at all the other factories and the Le Mans strikers continue on their own - on 12.11 two thirds of the Le Mans workers are still on strike. Even if on 12.11 the resumption of work at Cléon is 'normal', work stoppages continue in some parts of the factory on 13.11. On 14.11 management announces that the wages negotiations for 1992 will start already on 3.12. At the same time an agreement is signed between the Le Mans management and unions with a monthly bonus of 200 francs and a 'profit bonus' of 1300 francs for 1991 and 2400 francs for 1992. After 11 days on strike work is resumed with a vote of 730 in favour and 683 against.

Despite various manipulations, the strikers' wishes and assemblies have been respected at Le Mans. The end of the strike at Cléon however, represents a regression compared with the 'democratic' practices which the unions often have respected until now - even if they in most cases anyway could achieve what they wanted through a number of manipulations linked to repression and management blackmailing. We find ourselves in a period where the unions can

bureaucratically end the conflicts and simply order a return to work without taking into account the wishes of the rank and file. At Cléon they could of course do this because the balance of forces which three weeks earlier had made the strike possible, now had changed. This attitude of the unions can be linked to the previously mentioned 'participation policy'. This modern concept of union activity is necessary if the unions don't want to lose completely their position as intermediaries in the exploitation of the labour force.

H.S.

## THE RISE OF VIOLENCE IN THE STRUGGLES. DOCKERS' AND POST WORKERS' STRUGGLES

### The rise of violent actions

The November '91 issue of *A Contre Courant* wrote that recent strikes displayed "a mixture of a strong will to fight and the inability to maintain the control of the struggle up to the end, the will to remain masters of the struggle and the difficulties in finding the organisational means. It's not only the unions which are responsible for the non-spreading and non-coordination of the struggles, but they do everything to make such a coordination and extension impossible."

The managers are looking closely with some anxiety at the same evolution. The business paper *Usine Nouvelle* (30/4/92) wrote about "The rise of violence" and published the table below. It explained that the number of strikes had declined

**"Just in time" production is very vulnerable.**  
A few hours strike (10/2/94) at a Renault subcontractor (Allibert at Auchel providing part of the body) stopped the main Renault factory in Douai in northern France.  
(From the *Echanges* bulletin *Dans le monde une classe en lutte* no.2)

the balance of forces which three weeks earlier had made the strike possible, now had changed. This attitude of the unions can be linked to the previously mentioned 'participation

in 1991 compared to 1990 (1352 against 1558), but that this decrease has been accompanied by strong rise of violent actions (including frequent 'sequestration' - locking up of managers). These figures about the number of strikes has to be taken with caution - certainly they are underestimated because generally they don't include the short and/or very local stoppages, of which there probably has been an increase.

## Société Métallurgique de Normandie (S.M.N.)

This is a long struggle with quite a lot of demonstrations, fights in the streets of Caen, ransacking of offices and headquarter of the firm - attempting to stop or to delay the total closure of the steel industry (existing for some centuries) in this part of France. This long process started years

ago with the closure of the iron ore mines in 1963. *Courant Alternatif* (4/92) describes the end of this struggle in the article: "Caen, the SMN will close, the cul de sac of a struggle". The last blast furnace was closed in October 1993.

## Renault Véhicules Industriels (R.V.I.)

RVI is the part of the Renault group building trucks. The restructuring follows the truck production crisis and Renault wants to get rid of 1,000 jobs out of 16,500 in the group.

At the Limoges factory 320 jobs out of 1,310 will have to go (in '78 there was 2,680 workers in this factory). The new restructuring plan brings about an explosion among the workers who organised a sit in 1. April '92 and violently expelled the director from the factory.

## THE RISE OF VIOLENCE

Companies	Dates	What happened
SNPE Bergerac	April 92	The director is locked up, against a redundancy plan
RVI (Renault truck group)	April 92	The director of Limoges factory kicked out by strikers
Alcatel Laval	Dec. 91	The factory manager is locked up
SMN (steelwork Normandie)	Dec. 91	The Caen offices are destroyed by strikers
UTA - Air France	Nov. 91	The president of the group locked up some hours against a restructuring plan.
Usinor Sacilor	Nov. 91	The central office in Paris is ransacked by the steelworkers
Renault - Cléon	Oct. 91	13 week occupation of the car factory
GEC - Alstom	Oct. 91	Locking up of the top manager and of the staff manager and occupation of the factory in Le Bourget (to be closed)

All these struggles (we describe some of them below) have to be seen on the background of what we wrote in the article *Struggles in 1990* in *Echanges* 72/73 about the tendencies of the class struggle in France.

## S A Doux

This firm has 2,350 workers in 5 factories for slaughtering and processing poultry. They went on strike (90% of all the staff) 23. March '91 to protest against cuts in their wages and benefits. All the factories gates are blocked 27. March.

## Dockers

Here we will only give some remarks about the dockers' long struggle which has lasted for months and years (since the end of '91) against the restructuring of the ports. It is not difficult to predict the result of this fight, considering what has happened in most other countries with the constant evolution in the new port techniques and in the sea transport.

In France there are 6 autonomous ports, 17 ports of "national interest" and 44 "district ports". The

**SYNDICAT CGT DOCKERS**  
BCMO Bd Leferme  
44600 ST-NAZAIRE  
Tél. 40 66 60 41 - 40 22 14 91

relative importance of the ports in France can be given by a figure: Rotterdam has a volume of goods transiting its port which is greater than the total of the volume of goods transiting through all the French ports. The dockers' resistance to the transformation of their status to adapt it to the new techniques (of course such introduction of new techniques is always accompanied by attempts to change the working conditions in the interest of the employers), is closely linked to the defence of the CGT union which has the monopoly of hiring and firing the dockers, of the distribution of work to dockers and employers. This back to the wall fight of the dockers can not withstand the pressure of capital: from 14,000 in 1980 the number of registered dockers has fallen to 8,300 in 1992. As a comparison the UK which has to rely on the maritime transport for almost all its international traffic has presently only 4,000 dockers. 21 million tons of the French sea traffic has been transferred from the French ports to the closest foreign ports. According to figures from 1991 the cost of container

handling in the least expensive French port of Le Havre is almost 50% higher than in Antwerpen and the most expensive one of Marseilles is 100% higher. This fight is similar to the last fight of the British dockers in July 89 (see *Echanges* no. 62), who despite more than 20 years of struggle were obliged to capitulate after a two week general strike. Another example is that of the Spanish dockers (see numerous articles on the subject published in *Echanges* and in particular no. 74/75). According to the new law, the dockers status has to be negotiated port by port, of course in order to divide the dockers' fight. After many stoppages and some patchy general port strikes, this law worked, as agreements on new working conditions were signed in some ports (St Nazaire, Cherbourg,

Dunkirk). In some other ports (Marseilles, Le Havre, Bordeaux...) some more or less repeated wildcat strikes were repressed by a coalition of the local employers, government and of the CGT). Little by little local

agreements were signed, the last one being in Marseilles. The new situation is not completely settled; from time to time there is still some local conflicts about the manner in which to implement such agreements.

## Post Office

A new law - the Quiles law - was the basis for the restructuring of the postal service all along 91, 92 and 93: the programme is job cuts, more power to local management, etc... The reform is general, but it is implemented only region by region and even town by town in such a way as to avoid a general movement against it. So a lot of local conflicts have erupted during the past years, mainly against the cuts in the number of postmen. Most of the time these conflicts are ignored by the national media and 'discovered' only occasionally when the mail distribution becomes completely chaotic. 200 postmen at the central post office in Paris were on strike for three days in March 92 and the manager had to withdraw the elimination of 25 posts,

## THE TRUCK DRIVERS' ACTIONS, SUMMER 92 ONCE AGAIN CLASS STRUGGLE SHOWS THE VULNERABILITY OF CAPITAL

Protesting against new driving licence laws, from 29. June to 8. July 1992, French truck drivers (*routiers* as they're called in France) blocked motorways and main roads all over France. More than 600 roadblocks were built (some of them with hundreds of lorries), and in addition driving slowly on the motorways constituted mobile roadblocks. For a time the government was powerless: discussion to achieve the disbanding of the roadblocks regularly failed, and when they succeeded on some occasions the roadblocks were immediately rebuilt some miles further on. When some 'results' finally were achieved in these discussions and the drivers' movement had weakened, still 13.000 cops and military, 12 tanks and 21 helicopters had to be sent against the drivers to dismantle the movement, dragging trucks off the roads and into the ditches, destroying trucks, and attacking the men with tear gas as well as the usual hard beating of the police. This took several days.

The quick rise of road transport (covering 70% of all goods traffic in France) has brought about a complex situation with quite a lot of contradictions aggravated by the differences with other European countries in the coming of the Common Market; differences in for example working conditions and size and structure of the transport companies. More than ever this completely flexible means of transport has become a central element not only for the distribution sector but for the production sector also. The concentration process in the distribution sector, the restructuring of the production sector, and the introduction of 'zero-stock' inventory levels and 'just-in-time' deliveries in both sectors, have brought about a fierce competition around the

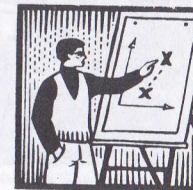
because this conflict was starting to spread all over Paris. Post workers in the sorting offices at the Parisian Austerlitz and Gare de Lyon railways stations went on strike against cuts in the payments for weekend work. The letter carriers of two distribution centers in Lille stopped work against the elimination of jobs. The central office in Marseilles was practically on strike over the same question for 120 days. When a post worker was killed in an elevator at the sorting office at the Gare de l'Est station in Paris, all the post workers went on strike on 28. February '92 and achieved a strict observance of new security measures. Workers at the sorting office of Bobigny (Paris suburb) struck 9. January '92 and achieved the removal of sanctions against three union militants.

## Alcatel - Laval

800 workers of this factory of the electronic group went on strike in December '91 when they were told that part of their work would be transferred to Taiwan and that 246 workers would be made redundant. The factory was occupied, the gates welded and the director locked up. The CRS (state police) reconquer the factory on 7. February and work resumes on the 10th.

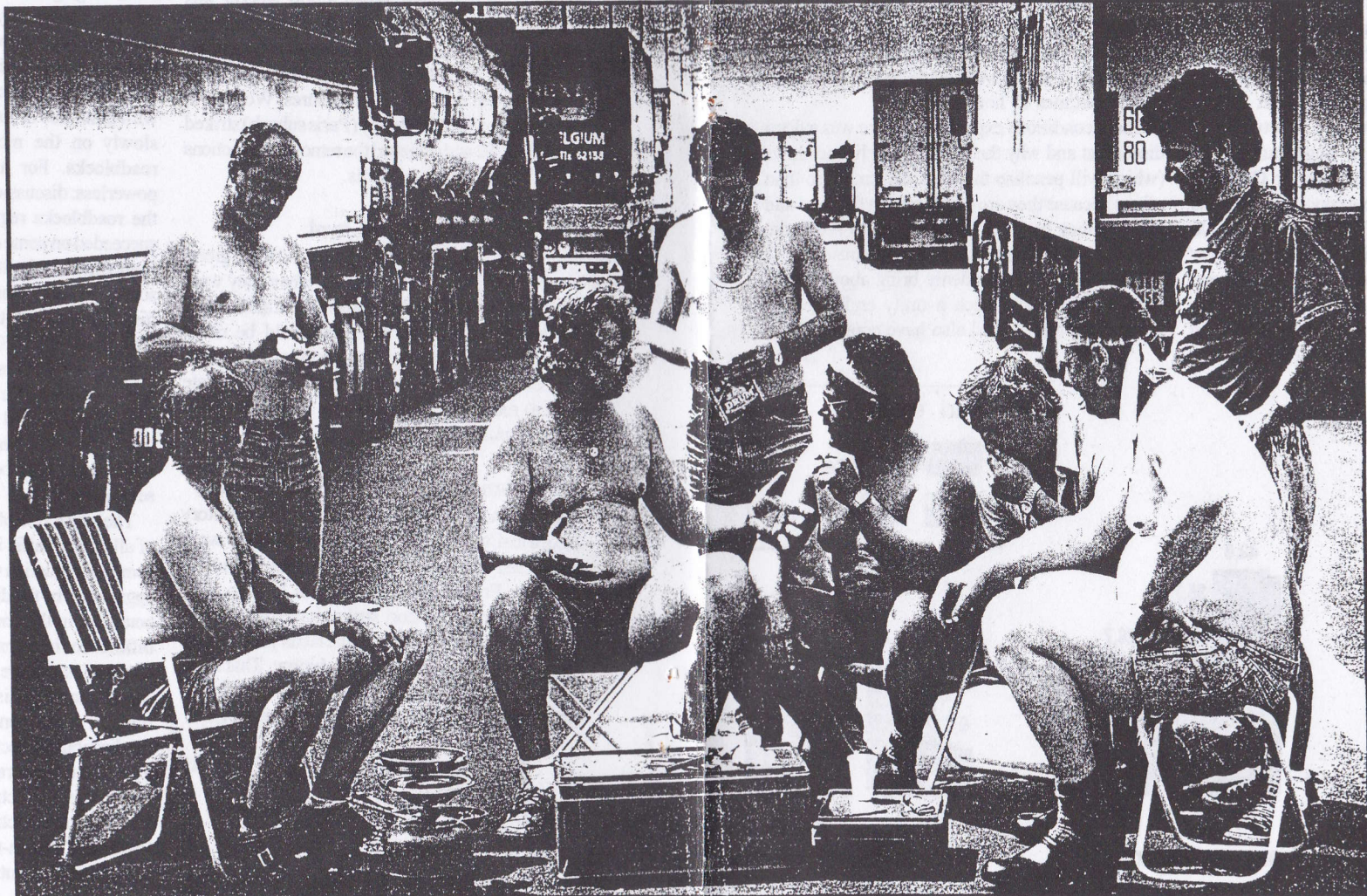
## Alstom - Montrouge (Paris suburb)

After restructuring and redundancies, this factory (electrical work) is to be closed and all the work transferred to another factory in Montpellier in southern France. 108 workers will have to go at first. A number of short strikes have no effect on the management decision, so the factory is occupied to block the transfer of the machinery. This sit-in lasts 7 weeks from October '91, even if it is proposed to increase the redundancy money.



HS

# Liberty, Equality, Anarchy



'It's no pique-nique, mon Dieu: French truck drivers yesterday discuss the state of the nation whose motorways they have blocked for a week in protest at the government's driving-licence 'points' system

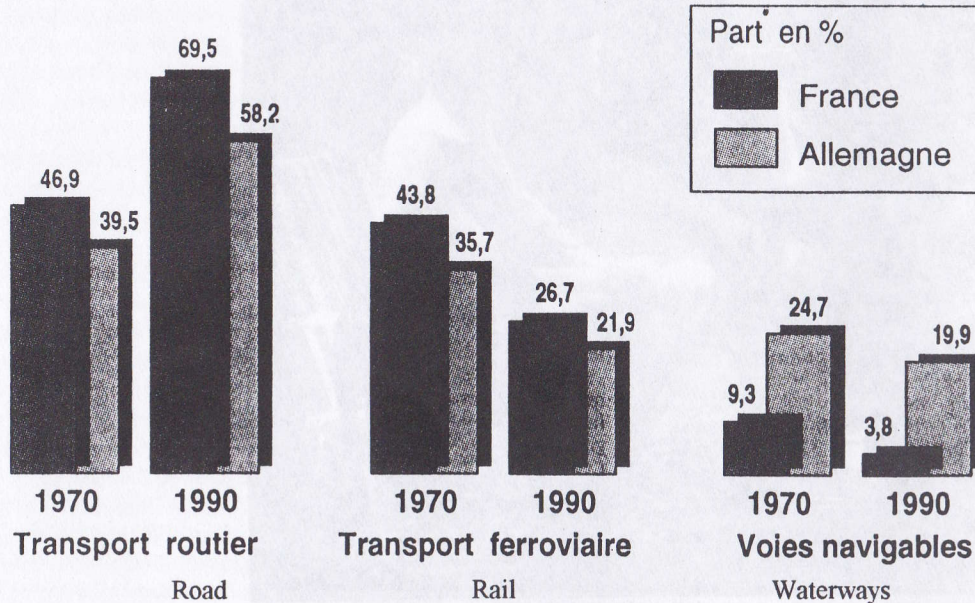
Photograph by Tom Pison

**delivery time.** The conditions of work of the truck drivers have been made worse and worse by the search for profit in a very competitive world market. This close integration of road transport in the production and distribution process has made the work of the truck drivers totally dependent on imperatives determined independently of them and which they don't have the possibility to influence. This situation is the main cause of a tendency towards a homogenisation (possibly unification) of their conditions of work or of their struggles (nationally and on a wider level). (1)

Within the European road transport sector, France has a more mixed structure, in between the extremes of Spain (with a huge number of independent drivers) and Holland or Germany (with a high proportion of big concentrated firms with salaried drivers). In France, out of 167,000 truck drivers 1/4 are either independent (10%) or work in enterprises with less than 10 workers, 40% work in enterprises with 10 to 50 truck drivers and only 1/3 in enterprises with more than

50 drivers. (2) There is a constant pressure on the drivers to become independent. But for all these categories their conditions of work are about the same, even if they have differing interests, even if the smaller enterprises in order to survive often must accept bad contracts as sub-contractors for big companies. This means a general pressure on wages and conditions of work, and to 'beat the time' the truck drivers must constantly work on the fringe of illegality: 50% of the lorries break the speed limit, 40% break the limit of authorised weight, the working week could be up to 75 hours with sometimes 15 hours a day.

These conditions explain why there was a deep discontent and why the new driving licence laws (which will penalise the truck drivers more than others because they are constantly on the road and because they have this 'obligation' to break the law, the laws thereby have a direct consequence for their job) could suddenly bring about such a wildcat strike with such a unity and size. (3) Another problem could also have contributed to



some anger or uncertainty about the future among the drivers: The quick spreading of road transport is backfiring against the smooth functioning of the production process. There are so many lorries all over Europe that not only is it becoming a nuisance in terms of pollution (which capitalism doesn't care much about), but a problem in terms of traffic jams and disturbances in the 'just in time' method of production or distribution; hence a tendency to regulate road transport and encourage other means of transport (mainly railways). The strike could also appear as a resistance to such a structural evolution in the transport sector.

We can link this general wildcat strike to other movements seen in the past years in France like the national railways and nurses actions, being the first action after these to have an impact on the whole of society. But its organisation was different from the coordinating committees emerging in the most important previous strikes. It is difficult to know how the strike burst up at first - if it was initiated by only a small minority and what the role of the independent lorry drivers was among this minority -, the level of participation and support (a small number of lorries could effectively block hundreds of others, even if the others didn't want to actively participate), and in detail how the organisation and communication took place. However, some points have to be underlined:

\* Even if the roadblocks could have been the acts of a (very) small numbers of truck drivers

which then provoked a huge accumulation of lorries, a high percentage of the drivers being blocked probably willy nilly supported the strike and did not try to break it. (4) It is difficult to know if the first ones to block the roads were independent



drivers or wage workers, but it is evident that the independents were more immediately threatened if losing their driving licence than drivers employed by transport companies.

\* Using CBs, road telephones and walky talkies, the truck drivers established a communication network which was used as a relay of the informations of the traditional media (the official road traffic bulletins on the radio had to give detailed information about the roadblocks in order to help all other users of the roads), communication

between strikers, etc. Details about the communication and coordination between the different roadblocks are difficult to know, but it certainly took place.

\* The strike took the form of a collection of local autonomous centres around each roadblock, where survival and defence was organised and where it was collectively discussed about the proposals made through national discussion between the government, the truck drivers' trade unions (unionisation is very low) and the hauliers' organisations. There was no attempt to build a national coordinating committee. The result of the top level discussions were discussed, agreed or rejected at the local level, which sometimes brought some confusion (some roadblocks being dismantled and others rebuilt), but this 'organisation' made it for a time impossible to manipulate the drivers through a 'central committee'. (5)

During the discussions, the differences between the two categories of lorry drivers (independents and wage workers) became clearer, and these differences were used by the government to divide the strikers. Two agreements were discussed between the government, the main employers organisations (FNTR representing the big firms and UNOSTRA the independent drivers and the small firms) and the trade unions. The big firms and the unions discussed and agreed on a new contract on wages and conditions of work. The small firms and independents wanted to limit the discussions to the question of the driving licence, but they were concerned by the other agreement also as far as they employ salaried drivers. Among things covered in the agreement were negotiations about reduced working hours and that drivers losing their licence shall be offered alternative employment. There was also an attempt to introduce a kind of regulation of the transport market through a regulation of the sub-contracts, trying to reduce the effects on working conditions caused by the pressure on small companies who are subcontractors for a single big company, and a promise of changes in the driving licence rules for the truck drivers.

During these discussions and even after the agreements, which were finalised in the night between 6. and 7. July, the strike remained strong and various attempts to break the roadblocks often failed. Outside Lille an attempt by police to lift a blockade on 5. July was answered by the truckers placing a truck with dangerous chemicals in front of the blockade. On 6. July, just before the big rush for the summer holidays, the government, taking the discussions and agreements as a pretext, sends the police and military to attack not only the drivers but the trucks themselves: tanks were used and special units began to destroy some parts of the lorries. On 7. July around 50 big roadblocks had been dismantled, but around 100 remained. Some places there was active and violent opposition to the attempts of the riot police to clear the roads, and in many cases dismantled roadblocks were erected again further on. Many drivers were sceptical to the deal which was worked out and it was uncertain to which extent they would follow the appeal to call of the action. But from the moment of the physical attacks on the trucks, the strike quickly crumbled. This can be explained partly by the fact that the number of those actively participating in the strike was far less than those actually blocked, partly by the consequences for the independents of having their trucks destroyed (a situation of course not wanted by the bosses of the bigger companies either). On 8. August the roads were free. Some attempts to build a kind of coordinating committee later on in order to restart the strike, failed completely.

Part of the driving licence law was effectively modified some months later especially for the truck drivers. (6) It is difficult to know how the agreements on wages, on conditions of work and on the sub-contract conditions are effectively observed because in this branch of industry quite a lot depend on the balance of struggle. The present crisis doesn't allow us to be very optimistic in this matter, especially concerning the small firms - the agreements could easily be just words on paper. From some interviews given some months

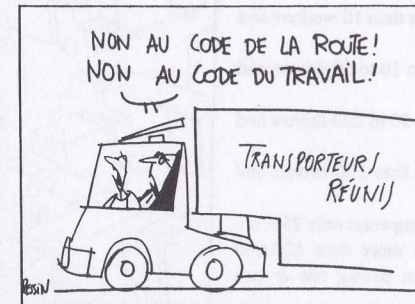
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In many articles in *Echanges* we have underlined the 'vulnerability of modern work organisation', for example in the auto industry. The truck drivers'

strike in France and the truckers' strikes in Spain (in '90 and '92) brought about on a bigger scale the same examples of this vulnerability. The consequences of the French strike were dramatic not only in France, but on a European level also, showing an internationalisation of conflicts (as seen previously in the car industry). The consequences were widespread in the production sector - impossibility to deliver parts to the factories based on 'just in time' deliveries, mainly the car factories, - as well as in the distribution sector - impossibility to transport fruit and vegetables from the agricultural centres of production to the wholesale markets and to supply the supermarkets who work like factories with 'zero stock'. An illustrating example was the Renault factory at Doubaï in France who had to close down after five days, being dependent on deliveries both from Renault's Cléon factory and from Spain, showing the strike's effect both nationally and internationally. Affected was also the hotel sector (tourists coming by car not arriving on time) and the building industry, and in some areas (Lyon, Toulouse) petrol depots and gas stations were blocked or cut off from supplies. The strike revealed not only this vulnerability and its scale closely



linked to the organisation of production and distribution. It also showed that, notwithstanding the competition between the different forms of transport, there is little possibility of transferring one type of goods transport from one mean to another: the reason is that the concentration and the

specialisation have introduced such a rigidity that the previous structures allowing alternatives to be used has been destroyed. A good example of this situation was given during the strike: When the fruit producers in the Rhone valley couldn't use the trucks and the roads to transport their daily perishable production, they tried to use the railway (as they mainly did 50 years ago), only to discover that the SNCF no longer had the adapted carriages and was unable to help them. These fruit producers were so angry that they blocked the railway tracks, adding to the complete mess brought about by the transport blockade. (7)

HS

(with various additions and notes by RH)

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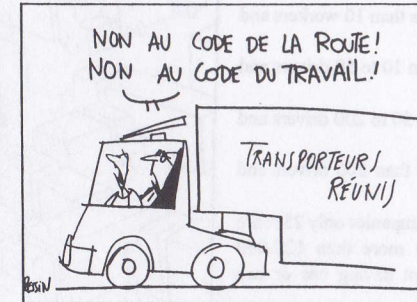
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(2) In France there are 36.000 companies and 167.000 drivers. Of these, 15.000 companies/42 % of the total number of companies are independent companies (only

one truck, no salarised workers), with 9% of the total number of drivers.

Of the companies with salarised workers - 21.000/ 58% of the companies and 152.000/91% of the drivers, the figures are as follows:

- 15.600 companies/44% have less than 10 workers and employs 28.000 drivers/17%.

- 4.300 companies/12% have from 10 to 50 drivers and employs 66.000 drivers/40%.

- 612 companies/1,7% have from 50 to 200 drivers and employ 37.000 drivers/22%.

- 72 companies/0,2% have more than 200 drivers and employ 18.000 drivers/11%.

Out of 8000 Dutch transport companies only 25% are independent. In Spain there are more than 120.000 companies - 86% are independent having one or two trucks.

To a larger extent than drivers in southern Europe, northern European drivers work for bigger companies, have better salaries and can easier follow rules about speed limits and working hours.

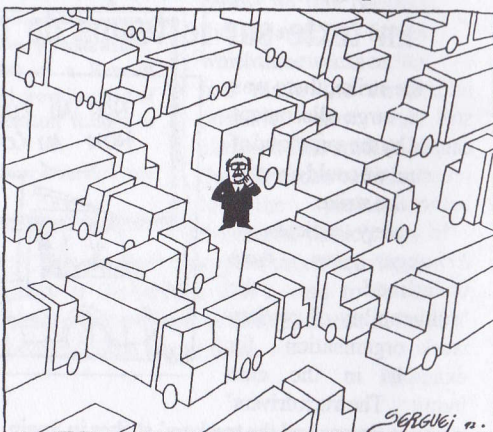
(3) It was the nature of the actions which was a surprise and not that the drivers reacted against the new law introducing a so-called "points system" for the driving licenses, already in force in many countries. Every driver has a number of points, initially six, and every breach of the road regulations will remove a number of points according to the importance of this breach. E.g. not respecting the speed limit will remove two points, driving after having consumed alcohol will remove four points - and 6 points removed will invalidate the driving permit and oblige the driver to get a new one.

The reason given by the government for the new laws was to reduce the number of road accidents. To this the drivers pointed out that in most road accidents there was no trucks involved.

(4) If we look at the 'population' in general there was not widespread hostility against the strikers. One opinion poll showed that 60% thought the drivers were right to demonstrate.

(5) The fact that noone, including the trade unions the government discussed with, can in any way claim to represent the drivers and have few ways to impose their authority or foresee the reactions to any 'deals' or 'agreements' worked out, was something which constantly was pointed out by and worried the media. An example: *The Independent* 5/7 wrote that: *one of the problems is that the authority and support for the traditional trade*

## M. Bérégovoy assure que « le gouvernement ne cèdera pas »



"The government will not give in"  
(Le Monde 7 July 1992)

*unions have declined... movements are run by coordinations... there is no obvious negotiator; noone who can return from talks with the government and command loyalty among the militants... Mediation efforts are often conducted on case-by-case basis, with local officials trying to negotiate with the individual leaders running each roadblock.*

A good example of the 'organisation' is given by the Norwegian paper *VG* (6/7), writing about some Norwegian drivers with a salmon transport who are stuck in one of the roadblocks and want to get away:

*"Why can't you let the Norwegians go?", we ask the local strike leadership. Of course they can leave us. But they won't be able to get anywhere. Further on there is a new roadblock, and there the leadership doesn't know them. Then they'll be stopped again, a driver answers. But can't you supply them with a written permission? No, it doesn't function like that. Each roadblock is self-governed. We have no influence over the next roadblock.*

(6) A not very widely published result of this was a circular from the transport ministry to the personnel controlling the equipment in the lorries which automatically speed, driving hours, etc. The content of this circular was the this equipment should not be used for controlling the speed.

(7) In this period there was also a lot of actions among the peasants, protesting against the European Community's agricultural policy and to maintain subsidies and prices of agricultural products - during the truckers' actions mixed with protests against not being able to have their products transported. *The Independent* wrote that on 3. July in Lille adding to the chaos already caused by the truck drivers, 350 farmers were allowed through roadblocks into the city... Riot police tried to disperse the farmers, who are opposed to the EC's agricultural policy, with teargas. The farmers responded by driving their vehicles into the city's urban furniture, smashing bus shelters and the like. On 5. July peasants blocked important rail junctions in southern France. It's important to point out that these actions were not directed against the truckers, but against the government.

## THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE CLASS STRUGGLE 1991 - AUTUMN 1993

This article is the complement to a previous article on 'Struggles in France 1990' published in *Echanges* no.72/73. The last paragraph of that article concluded: *The 'disquiet' and 'disease' we have spoken about can only grow, together with growing dissatisfaction with traditional control structures like unions and political parties and the forms of action they are able to put forward to the workers, to all exploited. From this situation one can only predict a transformation in attitudes to everyday working and 'social' situations, the persistence and development of collective forms of resistance where violence will have an increasingly greater presence.*

All these tendencies have been more evident and become more widespread since that was written in 1991.

1

This 'disease' became much more important as the unemployment rate jumped 'officially' to 13%. Actually it is far above this figure because, as in any other developed country, a lot of tricks leave out of the official rate quite a lot of unemployed people (special 'youth schemes', retraining schemes, temporary jobs, early retirement, etc...). The 'disease' grows stronger with attempts by the employers' to freeze wages - a reduction of the buying power which is followed by measures meaning a reduction of the real income. The standard of living will become even lower when these new deductions in the real income become fully effective: 1. Higher workers' contributions to the health care system, to the unemployment fund, to the retirement fund, 2. at the same time a reduction of the health, unemployment and retirement benefits.

A number of employers' practices from the USA is spreading very quickly in France. The blackmailing to totally or partially close the factory obliges the workers - and the unions - to agree to a wide range of 'special measures' aiming at wage reduction and often at the firing of part of the workforce: wage reduction, working hours reduction, restructuring and redundancies, factory closure, 'flexibility', factory transfer to a 'better' location in Europe or developing countries, etc...

On the average in industry the cost of labour is 25-27% of the cost of production, with 50% of these costs being represented by machines and raw materials. The cost of raw materials is attempted reduced through methods like 'zero stock' and 'just-in-time production', the machines have to be utilised optimally to maximise profits, and the labour power, like any other means of production, has to be adapted accordingly to the present imperatives of surplus value production. A worker must not be 'idle' and must produce effectively every minutes he is paid for working.

We can observe that all these measures affecting the workers concerning conditions of work, wages, etc., are not identical in all branches of production.



As it is attempted to closely adapt all the methods/techniques of production to the imperatives of the realisation of surplus value, to the sale of the products, their implementation has to follow the specific imperatives of their own specific manufacturing. Therefore there is no general politics of capital, but quite a lot of individual capitalist 'solutions'; there is no global government answer to this situation as all governments and politicians pretend. There is only a number of various 'solutions' in which the old rules about working conditions and working practices has no weight any longer and against which the immediate workers' answer is neither general nor uniform.

## 2

As in the USA, the unions can only offer the workers their 'solution' posed by capital through the factory, they have no other way than to agree with management proposals for the 'survival of the factory', sometimes adding slight improvements in the details proposed. All they can do in such circumstances is to help individual capitalists in protecting their capital from being destroyed. Most of the time the managers don't ask the unions' advice, and even when the compulsory legally established factory committees have to give their advice, they have no power at all over the factory management. Such management dictatorship contrasts with the 'democracy' in other factories where the workers are allowed to vote for some 'solution', e.g. if they prefer to be made redundant or to have their wages reduced: a choice between being hanged or fired. Such a 'democratic choice' is also supported by the various unions who then can continue to play their traditional function, putting forward their demagogy varying between support, hostility or adaptation to the proposed measures. In the same way as we have pointed out concerning the capitalists, the unions' answers are not uniform - between the various union federations or even inside the same federation we can find a wide range of 'proposals', not a general policy. Some of

them can support only symbolic resistance telling openly that there is no solution within the legal system - for example only sporadic actions against the closure of a Hoover factory near Dijon with the production to be moved to Scotland. The CGT supported, apparently 'to the bitter end', a long series of strikes in most of the French ports against an important restructuring of the ports and changes in the dockers status, but actually agreeing with reform as far as its union position (a CGT closed shop) could be preserved. Between these 'extreme' positions (doing nothing or fighting 'to the bitter end'), unions try to convince the workers that there is 'no other possibility' than to follow what the managers present as the 'needs for the survival of the enterprise'.

The general result of such a situation is that nowhere are the unions any longer considered as a possible tool of a resistance against the diktats of capitalism. We can observe this at a general level: In 1991 only 26% of workers on strike followed general union strike calls, as compared with 52% in 1990. The recent union demonstrations were weaker and weaker. We can observe this also at a local or professional level: localised or professional revolts or bursts of wildcat strikes are not at all initiated by the unions. On the contrary, they are rank and file or local militants' revolts against union inaction. If the unions follow the workers pretending to support their action, it is most of the time in order to keep this action at a low level to prevent its generalisation and to bring the 'exhausted' workers (tired of union non-effective actions and frequent demonstrations) to the point of accepting a compromise initially refused by them but put forward again with some slightly modified details. This union powerlessness brings more clearly to light the function of unions in capitalism and we can find the same consequence concerning the 'left parties'. In the recent general elections (Spring '93) some votes go to the extreme right populist Front National or centre-left ecologists (in reality often not votes of support, but of 'rejection' of the traditional political

organisations); most of the time an important level of abstention among workers brings the conservative parties to political power. This 'political game' meets a general indifference to politics, everyone thinking that the solution is 'elsewhere' but unable to express that in a political choice.

## 3

In the quotation above from our previous article *Struggles in 1990*, we underlined the rise of violence in various social and industrial struggles - a tendency also referred to in the article *The rise of violence in the struggles* in this issue of *Echanges*. This tendency has become stronger, up to the point of becoming so common that it looks like the normal way of social life. The silence/blackout of the media reinforces this situation; only the most spectacular events break this silence when it becomes impossible not to mention them or useful for the general interest of capitalist and political power to exploit them. We only have to look at a (without doubt incomplete) list of workers' struggles since 1991 up to the beginning of 93 to see the rise in the numbers of sit-ins, factory occupations, strong picketing, violent demonstrations, locking up and sometimes beating of managers, etc. Even if in some specific circumstances they are initiated or supported by the CGT, most of the time these actions are more or less spontaneous. The main point is that they are one of the expressions of a tension which we also can find in other parts of society. On one hand other social strata threatened by the capitalist evolution can react in the same way, i.e. illegally, with violence: fishermen, peasants, independent lorry drivers who were an active part of the lorry drivers' strike Summer 92. On the other hand, the crisis and the unemployment leads to more violence in the 'ghettoised' suburbs with a complete disbanding of the local economical and social structures. To get the actual measure of this violence we have to consider the constant reinforcement of all the various forms of repression: in the prisons,

or the whole campaign about 'security' and 'criminality' not only aimed at the repression of those whose social position place them as victims of the crisis and of the revolts, but also at creating intimidation and submission in general. To this repressive ideological weaponry we can add the media exploitation of the horrors of the war in ex-Yugoslavia and of racist substitutes of the social tensions: beyond bringing about an 'addiction' to war and violence (as something usual, trivial), this exploitation tries to generate - through a fear of 'the worse' - a resignation in face of the drastic measures for the salvation of the national capital and by doing so contributes to maintaining the 'social peace'.

## 4

The truck drivers' strike of Summer 92, the long dockers' struggle 91-92, a number of strikes in municipal public transport, many wildcat strikes in the rail company SNCF (either regional or national), can be linked to the previous national wildcat strikes of the late 80's (nurses, railways...). Though these recent strikes didn't bring about some original forms of organisation like the coordinating committees of the 80's, though the unions managed to negotiate the end of the strikes, these strikes started spontaneously and the various forms of action (including violence) escaped union control.

Such strikes could not be ignored by the media, not only because of their size but also because of their spectacular character and because of this link with the previous wildcat strikes. But the media are almost silent about quite a lot of local conflicts showing the same character. Sometimes we can find these struggles mentioned in the regional press; the national press eventually write three or four lines when they are over, except if a political use of a conflict is possible (for example the Hoover factory closure).

5

Rather than a chronological list of such struggles, we have regrouped some of them according to the characteristics of the workers' action (1).

### Sit-ins and occupations

**Nov.92** - 5 days for a wage claim at Lanière de Roubaix (near Lille, mail order company).

**Nov.92** - 15 days at the Bull computer factory in Belfort concerning closure making 1000 out of 1400 workers redundant - not against the closure but for better redundancy payment. The occupation concerns mainly a transformer which provides power to the factory.

**Dec.92** - Le Havre - Seamen of two container ships are on strike and for one day they occupy a Russian ship.

**15/2 to 28/4 93** - The Sopalin paper factory near Rouen against 412 job cuts out of 465 in connection with a 'delocalisation' of the factory. Occupation ended 28/4 when the police invaded the factory. But strong pickets tried to prevent any move of goods or material. On 3/5 fights with the police. All actions ended 10/5 with the agreement on a retraining plan for most of the workers.

### SNCF : la grève se poursuit

Le bras de fer engagé depuis le 9 novembre par les contrôleurs de la SNCF, se poursuit. Les cheminots refusent toujours de considérer tout voyageur en situation irrégulière.

### Grève des agents de conduite GIRONDE

■ Un préavis de grève de vingt-quatre heures (reproductible) a été lancé par plusieurs syndicats de cheminots (CGT, FO, CFDT, CFTC, FGAAC) concernant les conducteurs de l'établissement

Tarnos : blocage à GTP Transport

## Les cheminots déterminés

Hier, alors que les trains se faisaient rares sur les quais, les cheminots bordelais affichaient une détermination sans faille pour refuser toute nouvelle suppression d'emplois opératoires.

### Mécaniciens à l'arrêt

La grève des agents de conduite du dépôt de Bordeaux est reconduite aujourd'hui.

La grève continue au « Parisien »

### Strikes with pickets and blockades

**Sep.92** - Cement factory in the Calvados against restructuring, for job guarantees and a wage claim.

**Oct.92** - Slaughter house in Flers dans l'Orne in western France, 40 out of 50 workers on strike and block the entrance.

**Dec.92** - 144 workers of a meat factory in western France block all the entrances - they achieve to get all wages they were entitled to but which hadn't been paid because the firm was bankrupt.

**Dec.92** - Renault truck factory in Blainville blocked 4 hours by pickets protesting 423 job cuts.

### Unlimited strikes

**Nov.92** - Volvic (mineral water) factory in Puy de Dome. 680 workers on strike for several days for wages and against restructuring.

**Dec.92** - Plastic factory near Dieppe, 860 workers of the most important factory of the city Kerplas on strike more than one week for a wage claim, with pickets preventing all traffic to three sites of the firm.

**Dec.92** - Luneville in eastern France in a trailer factory. Against restructuring and job cuts, barricades preventing the deliveries. The strike is total, but 6 January the restructuring plan is confirmed.

### DOCKERS En grève

### Grève aux blocs opératoires

Grève à EDF

TGV bloqué à Orthez

### LANDES

Grève de chauffeurs à Tarnos

HÔPITAL SAINT-JACQUES

Préavis de grève aux blocs opératoires

6

A lot of strikes have disturbed the **transport sector**. The truck drivers' strike Summer 92 was important enough to deserve a special article (published above). The **dockers'** actions against the complete transformation of their status (most of them will become 'normal' employees, some will be put on early retirement, some will stay as temporary workers) was a national general strike only exceptionally for some days from time to time (when the unions ordered national days of action). Most of the time these actions were localised, sometimes very hard and violent - often the conflicts were not only from the rank and file dockers against the port authorities but against the union bureaucracy; locally some of these conflicts turned into violence and splits amongst the dockers.

**Public transport in the main towns** of France were deeply disturbed throughout '92 with strikes for higher wages and against restructuring. For the district of Paris these strikes were well known through the media. Several metro strikes ended in a kind of confusion where it was difficult to distinguish between the pressure of the rank and

file drivers and the attempts of various unions to control the strikes. On the other hand the bus transport in a number of regional towns (either council or private companies) was stopped by local strikes, sometimes lasting for more than a week. On 27. November '92 there was a quasi-total strike in the urban transport (bus, metro) of the majority of the big provincial cities against a new collective agreement with a merit-based wages system instead of seniority.

Perhaps more interesting were the strikes in the national **rail company SNCF**. Some of these strikes, more or less controlled by the unions, were against restructuring, either national days of strike or regional ones. A link with the Dec. '86-Jan. '87 national wildcat strike could be made for two kinds of wildcat strikes erupting concerning problems of security:

- A heavy prison sentence against drivers involved in serious rail accidents was the pretext for a sudden wildcat strike. On 15. Dec. 92 the whole French rail system was practically stopped by the drivers for two days - it was the biggest mobilisation since the '86-87 strike. To get a resumption of work was difficult even after management and government withdrew all practical consequences of the sanctions against the drivers.

- Local spontaneous strikes against unsafe working conditions for employees on the Paris suburban rail lines. (2)

The merging of **Air France** and the domestic airline company Air Inter was a cause of many strikes of Air Inter employees. But there was also a lot of other very disturbing strikes of Air France employees in the main airports, from check-in and ticket personnel and luggage handlers (5-10 April '93) to mechanics, etc.

It's impossible to quote all the strikes in the **postal service**. Even if the reorganisation of the postal service was a national decision, its application was regional with varying consequences in such a way as to avoid a national general action. The result was general regional strikes, some lasting more than a week: in Paris (Feb. '93)

10 10

Suite à la grève des conducteurs de la ligne 10 (Boulogne - Austerlitz).

**Le trafic sera perturbé sur la ligne 10**  
(Boulogne - Austerlitz)

Le : 14 juin de 18h30 à 20h  
Le : 15 juin de 5h30 à 8h  
Le : 16 juin de 18h30 à 20h  
Le : 17 juin de 5h30 à 8h  
Le : 19 juin de 18h30 à 20h

Nous vous prions de bien vouloir nous excuser de la gêne occasionnée.

several districts were blocked for almost two weeks against the reorganisation (with 280 job cuts in Paris and 3000 all over France); the distribution center in St. Briec (in Brittany) for four days (Oct. '92); Le Havre for 16 days followed by 80% of the workers; in Rouen for one month; Marseille etc... Most of these local strikes are settled by the end of February '93 and were successful, leading to a withdrawal of the proposed job cuts. But later in '93 the postmen in Toulouse were on strike for 153 days against the same attempt of restructuring involving the suppression of jobs. They resumed work on 22. November when management withdrew most of their restructuring plan. Unions pay only lip service to these local strikes often completely controlled by the rank and file workers in daily assemblies; they are financially strongly supported by other post workers.

**Dustmen and cleaners** were frequently on strike, but also they on a local basis because the workers involved were either council workers or employed by private companies. For instance, the Brest dustmen are on strike during three weeks in Feb. '93, achieving a part of their wage claim.

The actions of the workers of the **Chausson factory** is a model of the strikes where it is difficult to distinguish between the pressure of the rank and file and the control of the unions. From 15. Jan. up to March '93 the 1300 workers of this factory situated in Creil, a northern suburb of Paris, are practically constantly on strike. The factory is jointly owned by Renault and Peugeot which for different reason want to close it as part of their respective restructuring. Every day 5-600 workers hold a general assembly to decide what to do. Throughout this period a lot of different actions show on one hand the combativity of the workers, on the other hand the domination of the unions: offices are invaded, managers are locked up, railway lines blocked (the main line between Paris and northern France), the workers invade the Paris stock exchange, a main TV station, an auto show in a seaside resort, the headquarter of the company,

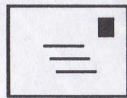
etc.. Scenes of violence were frequent, at the factory gates, in the streets of Paris... The strike ends with an agreement: the factory will be closed but all workers will get the possibility to be retrained or reinstated elsewhere.

HS

Notes:

(1) In the original version of this article published in the French edition of *Echanges* no. 75, we gave such a chronological list of actions (and a brief description of them) which we had knowledge about - a long list only for the period mid-September 92 to April 93. Even that list was incomplete, as it was based only on the national press and some regional papers sent by an *Echanges* contact in the western part of France. The actual list in the present article contains only a small part of the original list. Some more of the actions are mentioned in the last part of the article following the list and some other in *Notes about some struggles Autumn '92 - Autumn 93* below. Those interested in the 'complete' list could order no. 75 of the French edition. We have not included all the local dockers' actions as we will try to write a special text on this.

(2) For more details about SNCF actions, see *Notes about some struggles Dec. 92 - Autumn 93* below.



## LETTERS FROM FRANCE

**Extract from two letters from a French comrade to comrades abroad, end of March '93:**



"Papers here were full of the American elections trying to have people swallow the usual rubbish that after years of reaganism -monetarism decline

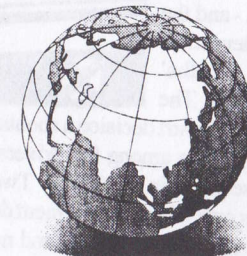
of US prosperity, a recovery will depend on 'another president'... Now this electoral circus is moving to France with parliamentary elections tomorrow. After 10 years of social democracy, most of the voters consider them responsible for the economic crisis: the socialist party has to shoulder its fair management of capitalist society and they were far less clever than their conservative counterpart to use the system during these 10 years to settle their political power. Their discredit is very deep with a mixture of their normal failure of their pretence to solve the present capitalist difficulties and of financial scandals, a consequence of their inexperience in the financial jungle and of the crisis. According to forecasts, the next parliament will get an overwhelming conservative majority. It is difficult to foresee the consequence but we can bet that they will follow the same politic of 'austerity' as the socialists with very narrow possibilities because the crisis is part of a world crisis and because nationally (and even on a European level) there is no money for social measures to cushion the impact of the economic decline...

There are some patchy struggles in France, most of them are against closures, essentially to get more redundancy money, but there is also some wildcat token strikes over very specific points which could mean that more important strike could flare up if some limit in the economic pressure is crossed. The unions have no answer to the present situation, so there is a strong decline in union membership which is even reinforced by the fact that the main unions are moving closer and closer to the management side - some recent collective agreements in big firms allowed the local branch to be paid a lump annual donation directly by the company, this donation being increased according to the number of votes received in the factory committee elections. We can even see some agreements more or less imilar to the two-tier wage system in the USA or reduction of wages or some other 'solution' to prevent redundancies but taking money from the staff."



"Today's second round of parliamentary elections will bring about a national assembly with such a conservative majority which has not been seen for more than a century. France has always been the rear guard of the world movement: the crisis that has in the UK and US in the past decade is growing here now. The same bloody 'solutions' of reaganism and Thatcherism are in the heads of quite a lot of the new MPs even if these recipes have completely failed elsewhere and there is a strong resistance among the conservatives themselves. Particularly the RPR (ex-gaullists) are sticking to the economical state intervention and protection of French capital, which means that they will follow more or less the previous 'social democratic policy'.

The uncertainty in economical, political and social matters comes from the fact that, contrary to the UK, France is still a 'rich' country and that most of the workers and the new and traditional middle class are not ready to any kind of 'sacrifice', which could give an explosive situation. More than 50% of the people have not voted in these elections (about 10% not registered at all, 32% abstentions and 7-10% annulated votes); if you add the votes 'against' without no other political involvement, the positive fact is that the 'politicians politics' are completely discredited, which means that most of the people will look for something else if they are attacked (what happened with the peasants and the fishermen could be one sign of this situation)."



## NOTES ABOUT SOME STRUGGLES AUTUMN '92 - AUTUMN '93

1992

-16/9: stoppages at **Renault Vehicules Industriels** (R.V.I., lorry factory) in Blainville near Caen (Normandy, western France) for wage increases.

-**SNCF action 15/12/92**: A railway crash in the underground railway station Gare de Lyon in Paris

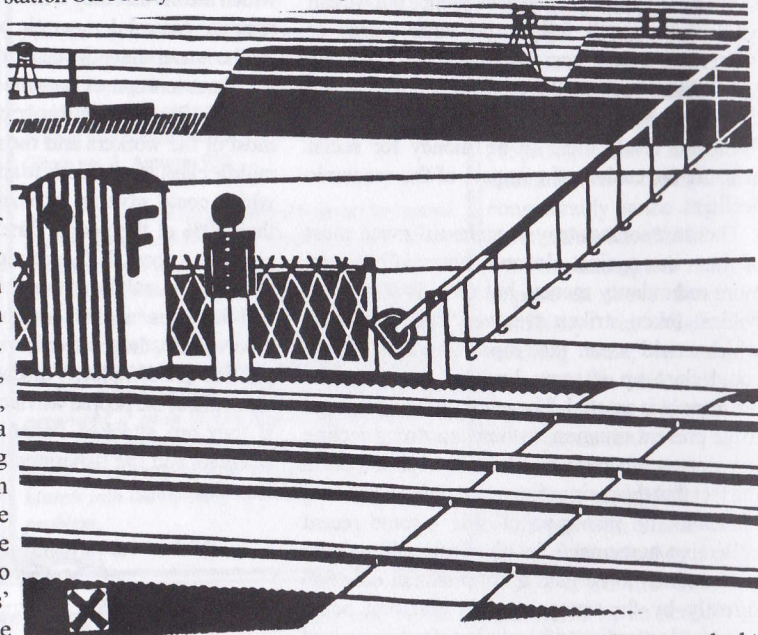
with more than 30 dead, was apparently the result of some bad coincidences but in reality of the fact that the rolling stock was not checked frequently and of intentionally sloppy security rules in order to allow a high traffic frequency. Anyway as usual, scapegoats - a driver, a guard and a passenger having pulled the alarm signal were prosecuted - and the driver sentenced to six months' imprisonment. The

very day of this court decision a spontaneous strike burst out in Paris among the drivers and spread quickly elsewhere in the SNCF. Two days later, the strike is over when management decides to pay all the expenses for an appeal and not to fire the driver and the government promises secretly that the appeal will conclude with a symbolic suspended

sentence. Some months later the appeal confirmed these promises.

1993

- **SNCF ticket sellers strike 12/1/93**: The SNCF management after years of research put into service a completely new and computerised system of ticket issuing and booking. This system called "Socrates" was launched with quite a lot of media coverage; of course it was supposed to allow quicker service with...less employees (the media coverage only focused only on that their work would be easier). From the start the new system brought a complete chaos and a bigger load of work



for all people working with it. The system had to be completely reviewed and for months these employees stopped work quite a number of times. They got some special benefits for their "new" work and the removal of the manager having supervised this brilliant operation.

- In 1993 quite a lot of SNCF strikes disturbed

the railways traffic of the SNCF. These strikes were either national strikes generally no more than 24 hours and called by the unions - for instance on 12. May against the suppression in 1993 of 6,200 jobs, or local strikes less controlled by the unions on some specific points concerning a category of workers - 18 May the drivers of the north suburbs of Paris demanding increased security on the trains or the restructuring of some services obliging the employees, 3. June in the Rhône-Alps district against the closure of a regional marshalling yard.

- In the Autumn SNCF was also been disturbed not only by "days of action" organised by the main unions (4/10, 6/10, 12/10) to canalise discontent and to try to show to manager that they can control their troops, but also by quite a lot of local rank and file, limited and often wildcat, actions. For instance on the 27/10/93, the 700 workers of a maintenance shop at Vitry (Paris suburbs) blocked the rail tracks and stopped the rail traffic of a line of the suburban rail system RER and of the traffic towards southwestern France. The same kind of workers stopped road traffic in Beziers (south of France). These actions are directed against a restructuring obliging most of the workers to move to other locations. In Paris on the 25/11/93 several thousands of rail workers demonstrate on the appeal of the unions. They invade the SNCF headquarter starting to ransack it, being stopped by union leaders. Ticket inspectors in several towns (especially Bordeaux and Lyon) worked to rule against their working conditions.

- **The cleaners of the Paris subway**, working for a subcontractor (COMATEC) having started a strike on the 9/6/93, were still on strike in mid-July. Parts of them are members of the anarcho syndicalist union CNT which wants to get union recognition in this company.

- Following a union appeal to protest against 700 redundancies (out of 13.000 workers) 2.000 **coal miners in Lorraine** (eastern France) with their work helmets and picks handles demonstrate in Metz on the 24/11/93; a building and a coal depot are set on fire and they fight with the riot

police when attempting to conquer the regional council building (47 cops wounded); they ransacked the townhall and the shops around it.

- **The French Telecom** are disturbed by quite a lot of local actions; a union strike on the 12/10/93 is strongly supported.

- **The Paris metro** is constantly disturbed by very local limited strikes stopping or reducing traffic (depending on how many workers who participate) - often only one line is stopped for some hours. The claims are varying: for the security of drivers and customers, against sanctions taken against strikers, after an accident has taken place, against new work schedule, or very local specific problems.

- A nuclear reactor has to be stopped for a week at a **power station** at Cruas (Drôme, southern France) apparently because of sabotage (a bar of metal was found inside the reactor).

- Wildcat strike 26/11/93 called by a "Committee of defence for employment" at the **GEC-Alstom factory near Lyon**: the workers invaded the main Lyons railways station blocking the TGV. The other Alstom factories (Belfort, Le Havre) are disturbed at the same time by similar actions against a restructuring plan meaning redundancies. They invaded the regional council building in Rouen. The Lyons movement is against the lay off of five workers after two top managers had been kept prisoners in their office.

- Frequently **managers are imprisoned**: Two hours in the labour court in Valenciennes (North of France). 10/9/93 the director of an auto industry subcontractor against the closure of the factory with 104 redundancies.

- Two week **sit in a foundry** (subcontractor for Renault) in Fumel (southern France) against a plan to lay off of 151 workers out of 920: 22/11 the police expel the workers. The action continues with various ritual union actions (blocking of roads, etc.).

- **The employees giving parking fines in Paris** (often women, often coming from outside Paris) are on strike 2 - 17/11 and again in December.

They demand housing or a housing allowance and a transport allowance. The action is weakened by cops doing their job.

- A strike of the **journalists of *Le Parisien*** 28-30/11 achieves the reinstatement of two journalist.

- Strike of the **printers of the CGT union in Paris** 13 and 14/10 disturbs the Parisian press. The conflict is related to problems of modernisation of the printing industry and an internal 'struggle' between various categories of printing workers concerning finances and power.

- Against a new working time roster and for a 35 hour week, union one day strikes in the **public transport in Lyon** in September and October practically blocks all this transport.

- On the appeal of unions and political parties, more than 10,000 persons demonstrate in Maubeuge against unemployment which is almost 30% in some cities in the area.

## ITALY



**COLLEGAMENTI**  
**W O B B L Y**

*In Echanges 72/73 we published translations of articles by comrades of the Italian journal Collegamenti Wobbly about struggles in the Italian bank sector and in the public sector. We have ready some material from this and other sources about the class struggle in Italy from Autumn '92 and onwards, but due to lack of space that will have to follow in another issue. In this issue we instead publish some material written in 1991, about the class struggle in general and about the transformation and crisis of the unions. Our reason for publishing this older material first is that it is of a general nature and describes important developments that have taken place and because it links up with and is part of recent experiences concerning an old discussion which has taken place again anew about 'alternative unions/unionism' and 'struggle organisation' - a discussion which we in this issue publish a discussion about between comrades of Collegamenti and Echanges. The material on Italy in this issue and in no. 72/73 (as well as a lot of other Echanges material about other countries) are necessary background material for this discussion, and also on one hand as an update to our old pamphlet The COBAS. Italy 1986-88: A new rank and file movement and on the other hand to struggles and the important political changes which has taken place in Italy 1992-94.*

*Collegamenti/Wobbly publish a lot of useful material which could be of interest to comrades reading Italian. Write to: Collegamenti, c/o Renato Strumia, Lungo Antonelli 13, 10153 Torino, Italy.*

## EIGHT REMARKS ON THE CLASS STRUGGLE IN ITALY

### 1

During the last ten years the average salary of workers in industry (on an hourly basis) has fallen with 10%. In the same period the effective working hours increased with 10% through an important reduction in sickness absence and an increase in overtime work. Moreover, in many industries flexible working time has also been introduced which together with technological innovation has permitted a significant increase in productivity. More flexible working hours have also been introduced in public and private services, and in industry and services the use of subcontracting companies has also increased.

The unions have made very important concessions concerning working hours, even in cases where the workers have voted against. So there has been an extension of part time work, shift work, night work (even for women)... In some recent cases the unions have signed contracts with special working hours for particular factories not yet built, such as the establishment of FIAT in Melfi and Avellino in southern Italy in order to struggle against unemployment and the mafia.

Today as previously the state's direct and indirect financing of technological innovation and new investments constitutes an important part of its expenses. Despite what we have said above, during the last ten years, according to figures given by FIAT, the labour costs pr. unit of production which in Italy was 100/150 compared with German industry is today 100/125 - the consequence of which is a reduction of productivity. The reason why the evolution of the cost of labour is higher

than the evolution of the wages, is to be found in the relationship between the direct wage and the labour costs - which is 100/207 because of the strong pressure of taxes and welfare contributions, retirement.... (1)

The profound reasons for this situation is firstly to be found in the persistent existence of numerous small independent activities in agriculture, commerce... which escape the taxation system. Secondly in the use of the social levies of the workers in favour of the unproductive petite bourgeoisie. Thirdly in the use of the taxes to finance the restructuring of the enterprises (in the 80s half a million laid-off workers and employees were paid by the "Cassa Integrazione" - a system of state-provided lay-off pay). Fourthly in the relative inefficiency of the public sector.

Despite the many declarations of the bosses, government and opposition parties as well as the unions in favour of fiscal equality and cleaning up the public expenses, all steps in such a direction are more or less difficult. The content and clauses of the negotiations starting in June 91, will need to reduce the labour costs; this will inevitably mean a reduction of state subsidies, retirement payment, health benefits, housing allowances and public transport expenditure. Measures taken in this direction during 1989 provoked big strikes, to which the government had to react by mildening the measures taken (payments for medical care), but the measures haven't changed. Today one talks about a wage freeze for the next years, starting with the public sector.

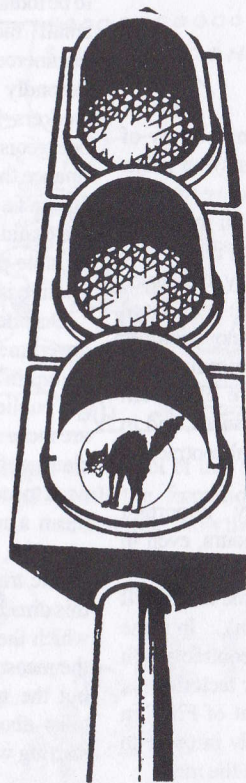
### 2

Already during the last ten years the average salary in the public sector has developed differently than in the private sector, and the sector has seen various wage increases, in particular for teachers, nurses, rail workers... In the case of the school sector and the railways, the mass 'extra-union' movements of the previous years (COBAS) was an important reason for this. In the health sector the

increase for the nurses was caused by the wage rises already given to the doctors and by shortage of nurses due to the poor salaries offered. Between 1985 and 1990 to give just one example, the salary of teachers increased with the same amount as it had fallen between 1978 and 1985.

It is at the same time interesting to note that between 1970 and 1990, the average salaries of the public sector workers have increased less than those of the private sector workers. The decline of the wages in the private sector in the 80s was less damaging because of the important gains already made by the workers during the 70s. The autonomous struggles of the 80s haven't reversed the tendency of differentials and hierarchy in wages. It was so even in the sectors where the struggles were as more radical (in the schools bigger increases for regular teachers and less for non-permanent teachers, in the railways more to the drivers and less to the office workers).

The public sector, more protected than the private sector because it is less subjected to international competition, today experiences a growing pressure towards greater productivity, a pressure which leads to important conflicts. It is sufficient firstly to refer to the railways, where the struggle of the drivers' coordination was born not only out of wages questions, but also opposition to the introduction of one-driver-only operated trains. Secondly to the post and bank offices where there has been changes in the organisation of work with the introduction of information technology and in the working hours with offices open in the afternoon. (2)



## 3

A fact which necessitates an important pressure and attack on the incomes of the lowest social groups, is the very big public budget deficit.

Historically the Italian bourgeoisie and the politicians transferred the social contradictions to the public expenses. This solution appear to be coming to an end, even if we don't believe the dramatisations made by the papers for political purposes when the negotiations are taking place.

But every radical cut in public expenses supposes important changes of the present political system: the reduction of the patronage role of the parties ('clientism'); a strenghtening of the executive power over the legislative power; a more efficient control from above of the social conflicts, in the first place in the public sector. It is not by accident that the state, after the COBAS movement, has introduced a new law about strikes in essential services, a law adopted in agreement and cooperation with the unions which anyway already had equipped themselves with

their own rules about self-regulation of strikes more restrictive than the law. (3)

The union leaderships were wavering between opposition to the more unpopular measures (for example they threatened to launch a general strike against a too strong reduction of pensions) and participation in the measures to tighten up the economy, with the effect that they came into conflict with part of their own rank and file and

lower parts of the union apparatus. Recently we have seen that the CISL has excluded the big majority of the Milano members of its metal workers union FIM and the birth of an alternative union - the FLMU (FLM-Uniti / United Metal Workers - formed by thousands of those expelled. (4) Today we can see the possibility of an alternative union to the big union federations being built, on the basis of an certain number of local opposition groups.

## 4

During the last ten years the workers have reacted against wage reductions and worsening of conditions with some important struggles in sectors which I have already mentioned: with strikes for the defence of the automatic indexation of wages (*Scala mobile*) (as in the 1983-84 strikes and with the consitution of the *autoconvocati* movement); with strikes against the 'tickets' in 1989; strikes which in addition to their immediate results also contributed to the spreading of workshop and factory struggles.....

If one considers the social transformations which are not directly linked with the social conflicts, it is interesting to note important changes in conditions of proletarian income: a reduction in the birthrate from more than a million in 1970 to around the half in 1980 and an important increase in the number of women working. The structure of the family has therefore gone through an important change resembling the situation in northern Europe, at least in the most developed regions of Italy. An interesting indicator of this change is that many proletarian families bought their own apartment. The price of apartments have doubled, if not tripled, the last 20 years. A consequence has been that a part of the population can't any longer afford to buy an apartment and they have no possibility to get one through political support or through direct means of pressure (house occupations and similar methods).

On the other hand has the link between

consuming and access to the labour market changed. The number of children continuing education after the compulsory age has increased from 40% to 60% between the 70s and the end of the 80s, even to 90% in the big cities in the north. The increase in the number of old people and the necessity to guarantee them socially acceptable conditions of life without the support of solid traditional family structures, leads to increased public and private expenses and growing tensions.

To sum up the above, the objects of social conflicts, the characteristics of the development, the contradictions in society, also change the conditions of the wages struggles which express themselves in new forms.

## 5

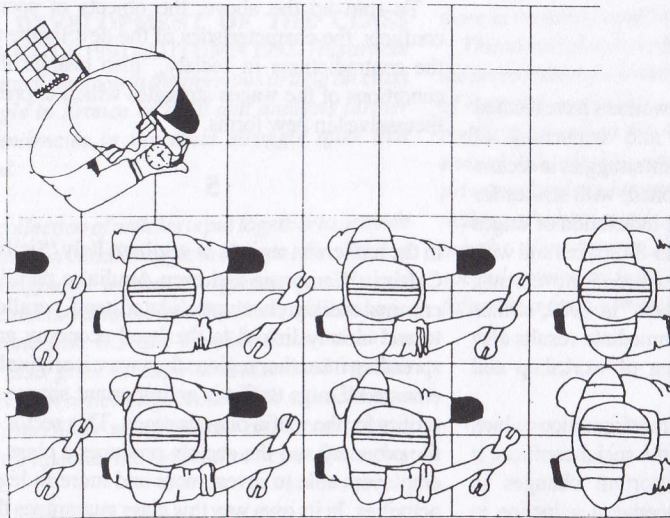
In the numerous regions in southern Italy (Sicilia, Calabria, Campania and even Apulia) a parallel criminal economy has consolidated itself, parallel to and closely linked to the legal economy and spreading into other regions than were it originally emerged. Drugs traffic is an important source of profits for the mafia organisations. This sector of the economy and the society produces a class of employers able to invest more and more in legal activities. In its own way this class guarantees the public order and the social peace in the areas it is engaged in and aids the state by buying state bonds. But at the same time it produces tensions which are difficult to manage, not so much due to the murders committed by the mafia but because of tax evasion and preventing other sectors of society from productive and social rationalisation.

The fact that the south is seen as the domain of criminal activity and political 'clientism' leads to localist and regionalist reactions in the northern regions, with potentially disturbing effects on the political and social equilibrium.

6

During 1990 contracts were signed in the most important industrial sectors. For the first time since 1980 there was a certain rank and file combativity during the contract negotiations.

The negotiations were preceded and accompanied by workshop strikes concerning the



amount of work and unhealthy working conditions, like at FIAT during Spring and Autumn 89. There was also a tendency to increased union membership and to a certain extent election of new delegates in the factories. This return to the unions can appear as a means "to do something" faced with a harder policy from management. The relationship between the workers and the unions is different from workshop to workshop and factory to factory, depending on the development of the struggles, the policy of the management and the unions, the presence of more or less important opposition groups... The situation is therefore different from the public sector, where it is relatively easier to wage general struggles and establish structures outside the official union federations.

The generation of young workers formed during the 80s has started to move, to experiment with forms of action and organisation, to establish collective relationships between themselves and the generation of the end of the 70s. The objectives and forms of action of the struggles 1989-90 don't appear as particularly new. But what is important is the break with the passivity of the last ten years, the return to collective action by layers of workers which the bosses and the unions believed they could completely control.

In the case of Italy one can really talk about different generations of workers in a factory. (5) At the beginning of the 80s there was a stop in taking on new workers and short-time work was widespread. In the second half of the 80s workers were taken on again, but with widespread use of special 'training schemes' allowing the employment of workers on reduced salaries (for the purpose of 'training' them), having the effect that many young workers were taken

on and establishing layers of workers of different ages in the factories. Without overestimating the generation difference, it is evident that the 'new workers' are born in the big industrial cities, often has a better education than what is needed to perform their job, see their factory work as a situation they would like to quicker get out of, and have a new language and behaviour.

The bosses have reacted to development of struggles with lay-offs (*Cassa Integrazione* work) and in certain cases with political firings and various threats. The contracts, which eventually were signed, meant a defeat for the workers.

7

In the months following the signing of the contracts in industry, it came to various rank and file reactions against the unions.

In the northern regions, and in particular in Lombardy, an important number of workers expressed their intention to form an 'lombardist' union with the objective of separating the negotiations for this more wealthy region from the national negotiations and reduce the pressure of taxes and welfare contributions on the wages - and in this way allow a wage increase without a confrontation with the bosses and even to ally themselves with the small enterprises. The polemic against the party system and an overwhelming state regulation might offer these sectors of workers an imaginary way to confront their present difficulties.

In the same regions the FLMU, which we have talked about, was formed on initiative of factory delegates as a parallel structure to the union and with specific objectives. The most important example is the legal conflict over the payment of meals for the workers in a number of factories. To eat in the canteen is considered, in the factories where there is a canteen, as part of the salary. The workers who don't eat there for various reasons like strikes, vacancies and sickness can get a compensation. An agreement between the employers and the unions fixed that compensation to a symbolic 200 liras (approximately 80 pence). A group of delegates brought this question to the Milano labour court which established that the compensation should be 6000 liras and that they should get a backpay for the last five years. To obtain this payment other workers individually have to bring their employers to the labour court, and groups of delegates collected proxies for this purpose. To give the most important example: FIAT managers put pressure on the workers to refrain from doing this and the unions did the same. Despite the pressure, thousands of workers gave their signature to obtain this payment, an

amount of money which is bigger than the average wage increase in the contract. The CISL and UIL declared that they wouldn't work any longer with the CGIL if it covered its delegates which collected the signatures, so the CGIL took sanctions against the delegates also.

The COBAS of Alfa workers in Aresa and the 'autoconvocati' representatives of Alfa in Pomigliano base their recognition in the factories on activities in such questions more than on strikes and open struggles.

8

The negotiations about the 'cost of labour' start in June 91. The *Confindustria* (employers' federation) intend to abolish most of what remains of the automatic wage indexation, to reduce their own contributions and to radically reform the labour market...

The unions are divided about which concessions to make, but they support the substance of the *Cofindustria* proposals, partly because they in this way hope to have a greater possibility for manoeuvre when the automatic indexation of the wages is abolished.

A group of CGIL lawyers have already prepared a proposal to privatise the employment contracts in the public sector, something which means to transfer to the negotiations between employers and unions certain parts of the employment conditions of public sector workers which now is governed by the law: for example staffing, decisions at local level, transfer of workers... In particular, this will mean the possibility to dismiss workers, to lay off public sector workers through the *Cassa Integrazione*, which in fact was already possible but will be made easier through the pretended equalisation of conditions between employees of the public and private sector.

There are disagreements about what to do in the government. The rank and file assemblies are more or less anxious about the future, but precise information about the situation is lacking and the

struggles have difficulties to start. On 25 May there will be a strike in the schools against the privatisations, but the censorship of the press is almost total.

It appears inevitable that during the next years important transformations of the conditions of the salarised workers will take place. Changes are prepared concerning pension (higher pension age and reduction of the retirement benefit), cuts in the welfare payments, modifications of the working hours to use the machinery full time...

In particular it is wanted to change the conditions of the workers who presently have relatively better conditions, mainly because it is difficult to attack the low-income workers which have no legal protection and which are in direct competition with the Asiatic countries and in Italy with the immigrants from Africa and eastern Europe. Such a big operation which will attack the strong sectors of workers will require a very strong management of the conflicts.

There are already some interesting signs in this direction. It is sufficient to mention that the strike of 22 February against the war, on the initiative of the school COBAS and other rank and file groups, was not mentioned in any paper except for *Il Manifesto*, which told very little about it even if we were 200,000 strikers in a very difficult situation.

C.S., Spring '91

Notes by *Echanges*:

- (1) About FIAT, see *Echanges* 72/73.
- (2) About the Italian bank sector, see *Echanges* 72/73.
- (3) See *Echanges* 65 about the law in Italy, and no. 74/75 p.32 about the same discussion in Spain.
- (4) The CISL is the national Christian trade union federation, in the Milano area to the 'left' of the 'communist' union federation. The Milano section of the FIM was the most important section of union.)
- (5) About this see also the article on FIAT in no.72/73. Interesting material about this can be found in the book this article is taken from, M. Revelli's history of the FIAT workers and their struggles: *Lavorare in FIAT*.

## TRANSFORMATION AND CRISIS OF THE UNIONS

### 1

If we merely consider the number of union members, it is impossible to assert that Italian trade unions are in crisis. A significant proportion of workers still belong to confederal (1) or autonomous unions, the union apparatus remains an imposing force, tens of thousands of bureaucrats and their agents make a living as union representatives. New laws in the 80s have reinforced the bureaucracy's control over the workers. The often-discussed lack of union democracy is of much greater interest to oppositional political activists - inside or outside the unions - than to the mass of workers.

### 2

A few brief facts should help to put things in perspective. Between 1980 and 1990, the C.G.I.L., Italy's leading union confederation, went from around 4,500,000 to around 5,000,000 members, thus undergoing a moderate increase. But the proportion of pensioners rose from 25% to nearly 50%. In a word, even the union with the strongest working class tradition has increased its function as patron, as an agency offering consultancy, services and protection to weak, isolated members of society. Stepping down to the micro-economic level, we can observe that at Banca San Paolo, over 70% of recent hires and nearly 100% of counter clerks are members of confederal or autonomous unions. They have discovered that a union card is good insurance against job-related risks (mainly miscalculation). The union, in conclusion, is increasingly a kind of insurance company.

### 3

We can reasonably assume that the weight of unions in Italy more or less reflects the shortcomings of the substitute bureaucracy providing the services that the actual state bureaucracy is unable to provide. To a lesser extent, this function fully applies in the case of industrial workers as well. In a society that is highly regulated by government control, laws, and guidelines, the guardianship role of unions is ubiquitously exalted. It is no accident that unionization is low among the masses of marginal, unprotected workers employed in a myriad of small companies and factories under the worst forms of exploitation. The union bureaucracy seems entirely uninterested in devoting resources, manpower and energy to this area of wage labor, either because such an initiative would require a highly improbable return to militancy or because the bosses in this sector often have close ties to the political parties of which the unions are transmission belts.

### 4

The only initiative taken by the unions in this field is to call for greater fiscal justice, by which tax evaders should be forced to pay up. The only problem with this idea is that the Istituto Nazionale della Previdenza Sociale, the agency that pays pensions, unemployment benefits, sick-pay, etc., and that collects taxes, is run by the unions, and despite years of propaganda about fiscal justice, nothing ever happens in this direction, aside from the useless strikes for which workers are mobilized.

### 5

An interesting paradox in the Italian situation is that the most significant autonomous strikes in recent years have taken place in highly unionized sectors: schools, railroads, ports, etc. Union membership neither promotes nor prevents autonomous struggle. Workers seem less and less inclined to act in accordance with the particular union card they carry. As a result, autonomous

struggles do not necessarily mean trouble for the unions, unless the confrontation takes on radical forms. In the schools, for example, the rank and file committee movement has seriously weakened the C.G.I.L., a union with militant traditions and strong left-wing ideological references, whereas it has done little harm to the S.N.A.L.S., the powerful autonomous teachers' union which, because of its emphasis on mere protection, remains unaffected in its main area of activity. At most, the S.N.A.L.S. felt encouraged in this context to try to take up the confederal unions' usual position and to pocket the dividends from the rank and file movement.

### 6

Notwithstanding higher membership figures, both confederal and autonomous unions are well aware that a prolonged period in which all struggles take place outside the unions can only weaken them. Hence their willingness to accept anti-strike legislation, to participate in arbitration commissions, and to make even more explicit their nature as state apparatuses. This has led to the apparently absurd situation in which workers hit by anti-strike legislation are defended by the very unions that approved it and themselves apply it. At the same time, the unions use their apparatus and their press contacts in order to organize occasional "action days" designed to channel workers' discontent into harmless ways of letting off steam. To this end, a modest but useful contribution is made by the left opposition, which helps to obtain a good turn-out for rallies, perhaps by calling on students, in order to challenge the union leadership.

### 7

The bureaucratization of social life makes possible, on the other hand, a sort of "fragment unionism." It is indeed rather easy, even on an individual basis, to use the courts to deal with work-related problems. This holds true above all in public services, but also in industry. Those who favor this kind of endeavor have to obtain peer recognition



and money, they have to find a lawyer, and they have to take legal action, hopefully with good results. A successful lawsuit may encourage the creation of small unions, reinforce existing unions, or even enrich a few enterprising individuals. The best known and most recent example of this type, the legal conflict over unpaid canteen money, was conducted at Alfa Romeo in Milan by the rank and file committee and at Fiat in Turin by left-wing C.G.I.L. stewards whose explicit goal it was to avoid creating a rank and file committee, but who were nonetheless punished by the local union leadership.

## 8

The social framework is, however, in motion, and in several directions. In the "wealthy" regions in the North, workers' discontent over frozen wages could well find an outlet in explicitly right-wing solutions such as joining regional unions dedicated to promoting a workers-employers alliance against union bureaucracy, waste, corruption, party rule, immigrants, etc. Thus, unions connected to the Northern League are being formed, with recruitment, for now, among long-standing scabs and former U.I.L. members, but also among rather militant workers who are disillusioned with the left. At the public transit company in Milan there was an important strike a few months ago against an immigrants camp set up in front of a tram depot, a strike organized by an in-house union that developed out of previous autonomous struggles. Fascists and League members came running to support the strike. Facts of this kind occur in diverse situations, and it is difficult to assess their actual importance.

## 9

On the other hand, structures with more radical positions have also emerged outside the confederal and autonomous unions. It is currently hard to get a grasp on their strength, orientation, evolution, etc. The problems facing these structures are well-

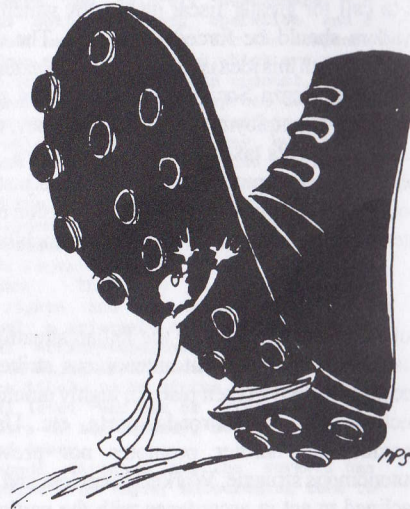
known. What should be made clear is that these structures develop as a result of the widespread feeling that there is less and less room for any social action that is not institutional. Many workers are miles away from a model of activism (ours, in case it may not already be clear) based on theoretical discussion and personal participation in movements, but sense the need for action and organization structures. Of course, we are not obliged to take charge of them, nor even, if it comes to that, to do anything, but such a process is under way.

C.S., Turin, Oct. '91

Notes by *Echanges*:

(1) With 'confederal unions' it is meant traditional national trade union federations like the CGIL and UIL, consisting of a number of national unions: for metal workers, transport workers, etc etc.

With 'autonomous unions' it is meant unions independent from these federations, very often organising only a certain or a few groups of workers/branches.



## VARIOUS TEXTS ON ALTERNATIVE UNIONISM IN ITALY

*Below we publish summaries of various texts about alternative unionism in Italy. The articles have to a large extent appeared in Collegamenti/Wobbly and the summaries have not been made by ourselves - we have only edited them grammatically a bit before publication.*

### ALTERNATIVE UNIONISM - THE CUB

The CUB (*Confederazione Unitaria di Base - United Rank and File Confederation*) emerged in 1991, from a strike against the war on Feb. 22, at which 100,000 to 200,000 people took part. In April the FMLU (an alternative metal workers union) came into being. During summer, a discussion developed about the official unions' attempt to prevent wage rises counteracting inflation, which led to a nationwide strike against these negotiations in October, with a limited participation: 30,000 to 50,000 took part, with demonstrations in Milano and Roma, blockades of rail traffic in Milano and a partial blockade of the Fiumicino in Roma). Another strike took place 6. December with less participants. 10. December the unions signed an agreement cancelling the automatic wages indexation for 1992 until a new agreement will be in April after the elections.

CUB officially came into being in Milan end of January 1992, with eight member organisations from different sectors: the *Rappresentanze di Base* (RdB) which is strongest in the semi-state owned sector, the FLMU (metal workers), the SANGA (airport staff), *Unione Inquilini* (tenants), FLSU (schools), UNICOBAS (public services), *Autoorganizzati Alfa Lancia* (selforganised organisation of the Alfa Romeo and Lancia workers

- part of the FIAT group) and the Sardinian union congress, representing some 30,000 members (of these 16,000 from the RdB and 4,000 from the FLMU). Other rank and file organisations are expected to become members too: the COBAS in the post service, the COMU ('United rail drivers') and the COMAD (other rail workers). Some interest exists in the bank sector. The foundation congress is to be held summer 1992. There is a growing interest in this new organisation in sectors already organised autonomously (for example the RdB in social services, existing since 1979), as well as in parts of the traditional trade union spectrum (also people who have left the CGIL and CISL) and amongst young workers who haven't been union members yet (primarily in the northern, 'lombardist' industrial areas.

This seems to make possible a "new beginning" of union activities, facing huge problems like a recession to be expected since there is an international pressure (G7) to reduce inflation, trying to prevent wage rises in the public services. Yet, CUB might remain a minoritarian movement for a long period without possibilities for full-scale trade union action.

Political characteristics of CUB:

- no hierarchical functions, instead simple coordination
- full-scale autonomy of the member organisations
- a minimum of delegation, rotation of tasks, reduction of functions with permanent exemption
- equality, ecological production and shorter working hours as basic demands
- solidarity as value and system of reference
- defense of the right to strike and union rights as starting demand

Let's see if all these words will become realities. At the moment we have to grow...

(By R. Strumia)

## INTERVIEW WITH FLM-U LEADER P.G. TIBONI

Pier Giorgio Tiboni was the general secretary of the union FIM-CISL in Milano until April 1991. This organisation is the catholic organization of the metal workers, but the Milano Federation has always been "out of line", because they for the last ten years fought against the political choices of the national leaders. Three years ago the national leaders decided to push Tiboni's group 'out of the organization'. In April 1991 two hundred union activists decided to found the FLM-U, a new federation of metal workers, against CGIL-CISL-UIL national union federations. Today they have today 4.000 cards and they joined other militant unions in other sectors to form the C.U.B. In this interview Tiboni describes the background on which the FLM-U was born and speaks about the solidaristic principles and culture that represent the common sense of the new organization.



## THE UNION FORM AND THE COBAS

Parties are out - unions aren't? The revolution of information means the fastest and deepest changes of production in history. It produces the de-specialised, proletarianised mass intellectual as a central figure who reacted with revolts, yuppieism, cynicism and opportunism. Between two balanced rival sectors of economy, the private and the state sector, and before the back-ground of a state bourgeoisie equipped with administration, parties and unions as instruments to control the workforce, there is little space left for alternative unionism.

The COBAS therefore insisted not to become an (alternative) union with the usual division of labour (and influence), but to remain a permanently organised/organising movement. After a political split (left - right) provoked by the state, the model spread into other service sectors and into private industry. Comparing the ability to fight of the teachers' unions and the COBAS last summer, the decision not to become a union proved right, above all considering the introduction of the law 146, the "Anti-COBAS-law".

(By Piero Bernocchi  
- from *Collegamenti/Wobbly* no.29)

## 'REVERSE REFORMISM' AND ALTERNATIVE UNIONS

### Summary 1:

Some thoughts by C.S. of *Collegamenti* on Paul Mattick's concept 'reverse reformism' (back to the roots of capitalist exploitation) which we experience today and his thesis of a possible radicalisation of the social conflicts as well as on the meaning of radical workers' struggles (in production and reproduction) after WW II, concluding in the theses: A) The self-organized struggles of the 60s and 70s have partly regenerated the traditional unions B) there was little space for

attempts to create revolutionary unions in that era C) at present there is a tendency towards a general alternative union in Italy; this could be the place for interesting experiments towards a broad and effective social opposition movement, a synthesis of workers' struggles and alternative social movements.

### Summary 2:

In this article C.S. writes about the problem of unionism in the present times, on a theoretical level. The crisis of the present institutional unionism is connected with the impossibility of reformism in these years for capitalism, all over the world. As Paul Mattick said, there is a 'reverse reformism', that is the capitalists and the government use the official unions to control the working class, but there are no space for real reforms today. The future of the class struggle may be here: during times of 'reverse reformism', the workers may decide to create new unionist organizations, delegitimizing the official structures and open up again the social conflicts. Capitalism is going back to the conditions of its birth, with increasing exploitation and decreasing improvements in the working and living conditions. Capitalism becomes the 'old capitalism' and perhaps it can find again the 'new class struggle'.

(By C. Scarinzi  
- from *Collegamenti/Wobbly* no.29)



## 'ALTERNATIVE UNIONISM' AND 'STRUGGLE ORGANISATIONS'

*The class struggle in many important European countries (Italy, France, Spain...) since the end of the 80s has seen the emergence of a number of more or less autonomous struggles, linked to these struggles various new forms of organisation ('coordinating committees' in France, the COBAS movement in Italy...) and also attempts - after the struggles have ended - to form various kinds of 'autonomous unions' and struggle organisations. Such phenomena, and political activists' participation in and discussions about them, are not new, but recent struggles have brought the questions up again both practically and theoretically. An important question in this debate is the possibility or not of maintaining and developing both the organisational forms taken during a struggle, 'rank and file democracy' and the 'struggle mentality' of the workers - to maintain and organisationally build on this also after the original struggle has ended and establish a permanent 'alternative' organisation.*

*Below we first publish a general article by a comrade of Collegamenti/Wobbly about alternative unionism in Italy. It is followed by a critical discussion article by an Echanges comrade, discussing 'alternative unionism' and 'struggle organisations' more in general and also taking into account the French and Spanish experiences. Both articles were originally published some years ago, but the arguments and discussion is of a general nature and interest. This discussion must be seen in connection with a lot of other material already published in or by Echanges. For example we can firstly refer to articles for many years about struggles in Spain (especially about the Spanish dockers' union Coordinadora). Among pamphlets of interest and still available are The COBAS - A new rank and file movement - Italy*

1986-87, France - Winter 86-87 - An attempt at autonomous organisation - The railways strike and Goodbye to the unions? (including the material about this latter pamphlet in no. 74/75). In the previous issue we published a 'dossier' on Spain which is of relevance for this discussion. We can also refer to the material about France and Italy in no. 72/73 and in the present issue. More material of relevance to these questions will follow in future issues.

RH

### SOME CONSIDERATIONS ON 'ALTERNATIVE UNIONISM' IN ITALY

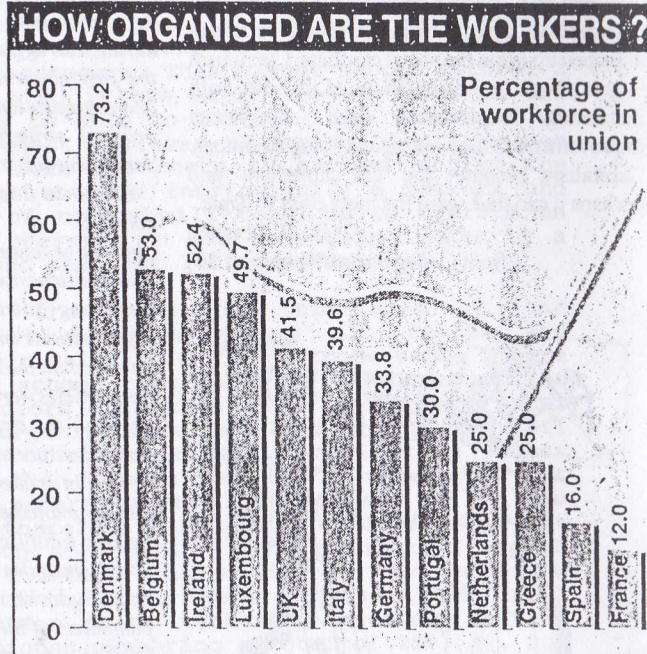
For some years now there has been a growing tendency to build alternative structures to the union federations, structures which (at least partly) have another basis than the existing 'independent' unions of professional / corporatist type in the public sector. In this process new organisations are constituted, and forces are developed which for many years have been present on the trade unionist field.

At the end of the 80s the union dialectic appeared to be blocked in a confrontation between the apparatus of the union federations and an internal opposition like the *autoconvocati* (1) in the engineering industry, the FIM/CISL in the Milano area etc., a confrontation where "trade union democracy" was the

burning issue, i.e. a hypothetical and not very likely selfreform of the union federations which could break the internal divisions between the various political tendencies. The ideological selfrepresentation of this confrontation could be described by the slogan: 'A union of councils against a union of the apparatus'. I talk about an ideological selfrepresentation, as the councils of delegates from the struggles of the 70s had lost their life by the second half of the 70s, even if some important traces of them remained for some years.

Partisans of both conceptions could therefore claim to refer to democracy: the 'base unionists' to the democracy of the assemblies, the 'apparatus unionists' to democracy by delegation. But it was clear that it was a question of layers of the same bureaucracy and that their internal struggle only had a very limited interest for the workers.

This dialectic emerge from the internal dynamic of the union on some occasions, for instance during



Source: OECD

the strikes for the defence of the automatic indexation of wages (*scala mobile*). But for various reason it was only a very limited freedom: this 'base unionism' channeled the opposition against certain anti-worker measures and the union bureaucracy could use this rank and file opposition as a force of pressure in the negotiations at national level.

On the other hand the base opposition has to be related to conflicts between and within the union federations. In fact, the *autoconvocati* and similar currents inside the unions tended to coincide with the current *Democrazia Consiliare* (council democracy) or with internal tendencies of the PCI who today are part of *Rifondazione Comunista* or the Ingrao tendency of the PCI. The Milano FIM/CISL was the most structured expression of a north Italian christian based 'workerism' which developed in the early 70s and which had refused to be controlled by the DC (christian democratic party) or PSI (socialist party).

In the second half of the 80s, the experience of the rank and file committees in the schools (COBAS) and of the COMU (*Coordinamento Macchinisti Uniti* - Coordination of united rail drivers) contributed to a deep change in the control of the unions over the workers. The fact that whole sectors of workers for quite a long time could struggle outside of the control of the unions, had important repercussions in the public services as well as in industry.

Even if it is evident that many of the COBAS, which emerged almost everywhere, only had a very shortlived existence (some were only the revival of limited groups of militants), the mere fact that they emerged and tried to coordinate was important. At the same time professional organisations on the model of the COMU emerged elsewhere in the railways and in other sectors. In the period when they spread, the school COBAS didn't build up permanent mass organisation, even if they struggled on an evident union basis. They wavered between building a mass movement and an association of militants; in their period of decline they tended towards being the latter.

Several factors played a role in creating this internal dynamic: the fact that the teachers didn't look for new and permanent structures in their relations with their administration, the fact that the struggle was relatively easy - and even the political culture of the active COBAS militants. These militants were divided in tendencies: either to form a group to exert pressure on the unions, to reject any form of unionism or to form some kind of professional organisation.

The question of why the movement didn't transform itself into a union from the moment on it was strong, deserves a wider and deeper consideration. On this question the article by Salvo Vaccaro on 'Beyond the union model, beyond the party form' in *Umanita Nova* 11.8.91 is important.



Anyway the school COBAS gave an important message. It is interesting to note how, when they spread, they were recognised as representatives by the all the groups of the same parliamentary left which until then had refused to consider any alternative to the union federations.

At the same time the success of the school COBAS has stimulated the development of already existing structures, and in particular the *Rappresentanze Sindacali di Base* (R.d.B.) which had been present for many years in the semi-public sector and with some strongholds like at the INPS. The R.d.B. certainly are the numerically most important alternative union and the most 'institutional' in its practice, culture and references. With its usual characteristic lack of scruples and great activism they have in the last months clearly increased their influence and their contact with other structures; despite some unfortunate difficulties and the resigning of some groups who criticised the lack of internal democracy and the malicious practice of the leadership (all kinds of connections with the 'Kabul fractions' of the PCI, to the greens, to the official unions in Eastern Europe etc.). However strange it may appear, the political positions of the leadership clique of the R.d.B. are mysterious and unknown to most of their members. But for the moment the R.d.B. interests me more because



of the social tendency they throw light on rather than the political convictions of their leaders.

Concerning the possibility of a consistent alternative to the union federations, the most important event appears to be the departure of the majority of the union federation CISL's metal workers union FIM in the Milano area, and their founding of the FLMU (Federation of United Metal Workers). The FLMU is the first industrial union of some importance not associated with one of the national trade union federations. It was an important break for at least two reasons: The political weight of Milano as an industrial city, and the fact that it seems to prove false the widely spread opinion that an alternative union is only possible in the public sector - a sector having relatively more legal protection and having resisted more against restructuring, a resistance which has not taken place in industry for some years. Only some months ago the author of this article thought it very unlikely that the Milano FIM would split from the CISL.

So the possibility exists for inter-categorical regrouping capable of drawing together a wide number of opposition groups. For the time being there exists professional unions like the FLMU or the SANGA (autonomous union for airport workers), federations like the R.d.B. and the younger *Confederazione Italiana di Base*

(CIB), better known as the UNICOBAS and regrouping certain organisations especially in Roma, craft unions like the COMU, factory groups like the 'selforganised' of Alfa, etc.

For the time being the COBAS of Alfa Arese and other factory collectives from the Milano region despise these regroupment proposals and prefer the old idea of rebuilding the unions from below on the basis of election of delegates with open lists and to reassert the central role of the factory council. It's a position which at least formally is radical, even if one can't exclude the fact that it is based on links with the tendency *Rifondazione Comunista* and with the left of the CGIL.

Even the USI (*Unione Sindacale Italiana* - 'Italian trade union federation'), which is explicitly libertarian socialist, is growing and settled in several workplaces.

The FLMU and the R.d.B. propose to accelerate the organisational process and establish a new federation, while the USI, UNICOBAS, COMU etc. are looking for the building of ad hoc organisations for specific purposes, such as the opposition against the wages negotiations, the struggle for union legal production and the organisation of local groups for common interventions.

The first type of proposal is motivated by a clear requirement for effectiveness: a federation, even a small one, which is present in different workplaces and sometimes with a very strong position, would be a more reliable point of reference than the simple collection of small structures. It is also evident that such an organisation would have more easily access to the legal rights allowed to the unions.

The second type of proposal pays more attention to the nature of the regroupment process and takes more into account the specific history and ideology of the participating groups. A new federation built without a thorough collective discussion and in the absence of important mass struggles, would certainly quickly become bureaucratised (and one

see that such symptoms already exist), and must moreover take into account the lack of homogeneity of the organisations in question.

If we leave aside the debates inside the alternative union organisations and turn to the legal framework in which they have to operate, it appears that the main problem of each of these organisations is to obtain the same legal rights as those acknowledged to the 'representative' big organisations. The alternative organisations therefore must spend most of their energy in the juridical field, which in itself is an element of weakness. Squeezed between their principled opposition to the 'institutionalisation' of the labour movement and the actual necessity to be recognised by their counterparts and to remain reliable in the eyes of its own rank and file, the new unions often end up signing codes of 'selfregulation' of strikes and agreements which reduce their original opposition to empty words. Here it is sufficient to mention the example of the R.d.B. and the COMU.

The new federation therefore risks to be born as a kind of new left version of the traditional federations and which from time to time would attract those workers not satisfied with the other unions.

And if, as one cannot exclude, oppositional forces leave or are expelled from the CGIL and then, as would be logical, joins the new federation, we would have a union linked to the new communist party which will try to exploit the competition between the left of the CGIL and the new federation.

I am aware that I have pointed out the worst possible perspectives for alternative unionism, but I think it is worth to think about this problem as clearly as possible.

C.S.

- Turin, Oct. '91

#### Notes

(1) During the movement against the *scala mobile* (automatic wage indexation) in 1983-84, the official factory councils, not the unions, used to summon workers' assemblies; this practice was called 'autoconvocati' and has appeared again the last years.

## REMARKS ABOUT THE TEXT "SOME CONSIDERATIONS ON ALTERNATIVE UNIONISM IN ITALY"

The central problem dealt with in the text is the survival of the alternative organisations born during the autonomous struggles and the coordination of their efforts to maintain a presence in the present and future struggles. The developments which can be seen point in two directions: One sees a strong need for efficiency and therefore orientates itself towards forming a new union federation; the other seeks to find new formula for a regroupment process which respects "the specific history and ideology of the participating groups", a work which would need a "thorough collective discussion".

The text describes well the dangers which can emerge when founding a new union federation whose main aim would be immediate efficiency. At the end it develops in a clear way where these attempts to build organisations on a bigger scale than the genuine local groups can end up: they inevitably evolve towards a new left wing version of the traditional union federations. That is - the text emphasize - "the worst possible perspectives for alternative unionism".

Against this almost classical vision another possibility is put forward: to try to build a new federation which avoids this bureaucratisation process. Here the following question is posed: Is it possible for militants, eventually supported by a rank and file movement, armed with the best arguments and the best will, clearly aware of the dangers of such a project, - is it possible for them to prevent a development which depends less on the individuals, their ideas and their militancy and more on the consequences of the existence in capitalist society of permanent organisations for struggle and defence of the workers? How can they escape the fact that these organisations no longer

are based on a struggling movement, but on the experience of previous and the expectations of future struggles, how can they escape the well described process of an alternative federation formed with the aim of immediate efficiency. The text gives no answers but calls for a discussion.

Even if we might introduce a pessimistic tone in the debate, it is possible to establish that there are no examples of struggle organisations which, once the struggle is over and wanting to remain permanent organisations, have managed to solve this dilemma in a positive way. The struggle organisations can't avoid to option for a solution which at the beginning appeared to be a good choice, but of which they couldn't control the evolution: either to survive opting for a formal legal structure and existence and become "a union like all others" (and be confined to a shortlived existence) or to try to maintain the rules and principles used during the period of struggle and to become a private circle of militants, which also with the time becomes less numerous. The problem in question is not new, but is posed with new words because the forms and characteristics of the struggle change with the development of the methods and structures of exploitation.

One can discuss the question of alternative unionism in many ways: either theoretically or simply as an examination of the events and facts such as they are presently taking place. These two approaches have to be linked and in doing so the thorough examination of the events must take first place to avoid ending up in a sectarian schematicism. Such schematicism would consist of applying to the alternative structures the old models of analysis concerning the unions:

-either only seeing that these initiatives in the best case don't transcend the "trade union consciousness" and in the worst case has contributed to the recuperation of the rank and file movements by the existing powers and organisations (see for example extremely one-sided position of a group like International Communist Current towards the COBAS, the

French coordinations etc..., more or less simply 'denouncing' them with very 'revolutionary' phrases)

-or only seeing them according to the old 'revolutionary' trade union models, for example anarcho-syndicalism.

Both approaches ignore an important part of social reality. The first approach, ignoring the attempts of the rank and file to build their own autonomous structures, sees only the attempts to transform them into permanent organisations, a copy of traditional unions. The second approach considers this rank and file movement only as the first step towards a new type of organisation whose continuation is understood as an opening towards a newborn syndicalism able to avoid the inexorable integration.

The tendency to build alternative structures to the union federations is not new. The text mentions this fact, but appears to confine it to attempts to build "independent unions of a professional / corporatist type in the public sector". To mention only France, the history of trade unionism for almost a century has seen quite a lot of attempts to build general or professional 'parallel' unions. In the revolutionary syndicalism after World War I, the independent unionism after World War II (which even tried to create a federation of independent unions), the attempt to regroup the oppositional groups of struggle in 1958, the inter-factory committees trying to federate the action committees of the factories in 1968, the attempts of the rank and file maoists in the 70s, and recently the coordinating committees - in all these attempts we can see the continued opposition between the union apparatus and the rank and file actions. It is clear that the organisation which have survived are the ones based on a profession (like the traindrivers of the SNCF or the metro drivers) or based on a sector like the Federation de l'Education Nationale (this federation quickly became a professional union limited to teachers).

All these attempts to build permanent struggle organisations could be described in detail. The

development of these attempts was always the same: During the struggle the rank and file movements created organisations (strike committees, action committees and recently coordination committees) whose strength, dynamic and radicalism were the very expression of the rank and file movement itself. The conflict with the union federations developed during the struggle and was not the result of a previous 'anti-union' position of the workers, but the consequence of the dynamic of the movement. After the struggle the idea to maintain the strength and dynamic of the movement and give it a legalised and permanent character was primarily the result of the action of some militants rather than coming from the majority of the workers involved in the struggle. Another idea considered that the workers who in the struggle had demonstrated abilities and 'class consciousness', could maintain this 'level of consciousness' after the struggle had ended and thereby prevent that a new permanent organisation followed the same way as the old union federations. It is not possible in this short article to develop why the simple fact confronting a permanent defence and struggle organisation, however active and radical its initiators are, is to become something completely different. Either it will objectively become an intermediary in the management of the labour force with all the consequences this implies; or, if it wants to remain loyal to its principles, it will become completely separated from the rank and file workers. Numerous recent examples confirm this. (1)

However correct such an analysis might be, it misses two essential facts which the article describes well in its analysis of the organisation tendencies in Italy:

- On one hand the permanent existence a network of "militants" (the meaning of this word can vary - it can mean activities in and for an organisation or a more independent activity closer to the rank and file). When a struggle is rising, these militants are available to bring to the movement their experience and proposals (which not always has a

positive influence on the development of the struggle). In my opinion the existence of this 'network of militants' is not related to the traditional union structures at local level, but is a sort of permanent product of the permanent struggle of the rank and file (which, according to the circumstances, might or might not use the existing union channels). It is true that these local union structures - through the activity of rank and file unionists - can channel the struggle, but it can also function as a force giving support and confidence to the workers in struggle. But the rank and file movement can also force the local unionists to go "too far", i.e. that their engagement in the struggle drives them to be separated from the union federations instead of functioning as these federations' instruments of controlling the movement. The activities of rank and file militants, either non-unionised or having very loose links to the union, could bring about the same kind of situation described above. The example of the coordinating committee the French nurses, which ended in the formation of three "alternative" unions and the expelling of militants from the CFDT health workers section (who then immediately built the a new union)(2) might resemble the split of the Milano FIM from the CISL to form the FLMU. These "dissidents" apparently can't do anything else than to rebuild the same kind of unions to which they belonged before the struggle. So they are squeezed between their legal obligation to function as representatives of the rank and file workers and the constant sabotage of the traditional unions when these dissidents try to perform what the rank and file expect from them. They can not any longer base themselves on the dynamic of the struggle, and in addition the split into different tendencies and the polemics that inevitably follow, lead to a crumbling of the support they had expected. When they try to recreate the situations which in the first place had pushed them into this position,

it becomes clear that these situations can't be recreated precisely because the organisations having emerged in the struggle now are something else. The example of the recent struggles of the French nurses and the impossibility of recreating the dynamic of the coordinating committee of 1988, shows that the struggles must find other forms of organisation and action. This does not depend on the activism of some militants or the relevance of their proposals, but upon the objective conditions of the class struggle. A classical example of this development of a struggle organisation is given by the Spanish dockers' Coordinadora with its present evolution into a traditional union after years of autonomous struggles. Despite all this we can



observe an evolution of this rank and file militancy: a growing estrangement from traditional union currents and attempts to further new organisations of struggle adapted to the new situations.

This last point brings us to looking at the second fact raised in the Italian text. Despite the appearances, we are confronted with a new situation with new rank and file organisations which historically differ not only in time but also between countries and branches of industry. Such a diversity should not be seen as an obstacle or weakness, but as a very positive aspect of the struggle which must be preserved at any price. The COBAS in Italy and the coordinations in France have demonstrated these differences from the independent unions of the 50s, from the strike committees which transformed themselves factory unions and from the action committees united in inter-factory committees trying to reproduce May 68. A remark can be made about the different development in France and Italy concerning the "alternative unions": The text uses the expression "a union of councils" which is a reference to the specific "autonomous" activity of factory delegates who can be supported by a rank and file current. Such a tendency could not appear in France due to the legal structure which allows the unions to have a tight control over the two types of legal union delegates: delegates to the factory committee and the 'délégués du personnel'. An autonomous activity of factory delegates immediately means becoming a marginalised. In its first paragraph the text underlines that the alternative structures distinguish themselves from the independent unions of corporatist/sectoral type in the public sector. The character of the alternative structures in France during the past years doesn't entirely confirm this statement, even if they from the beginning haven't had the character of autonomous unions. From the observation of the struggles in France the last years one can conclude that the alternative structures have developed essentially as professional (nurses, train drivers) or sectoral in the public sector (health, SNCF). But at the same time one can conclude that such alternative structures haven't developed in some parts of the public sector where important struggles have taken place, like education, civil servants of the ministry of finance,

and employees of the 'securite sociale'. In the same way one can point out that in the 1986-87 rail strike two competing coordinating committees appeared: one professional for the drivers and one inter-professional trying to regroup all rail workers. This situation one also finds in the present movements in the health sector where the professional coordinating committees appear to be more dynamic and able to mobilise more workers than the others. One can also observe that the attempts to create coordinating committees in industry (even in the state-owned) in most cases have failed. All this contributes to watering down the generalisations which one could be tempted to make about the development of the alternative structures and the previous attempts to create independent unions.

The text poses another essential question: "Why the movement didn't transform itself into a union from the moment it was strong, deserves a wider and deeper consideration". This question is relevant for the COBAS as well as for the coordinating committees. In my opinion the answer is simple. With the danger of repeating some observations already made above: It was always like that and it will always be like that as long as capitalism exists. When the struggle is on the rise the movement tends to become more or less independent from the traditional union (even if some union members are part of the ad hoc organisations of struggle and can pretend to have control over it). However, it is the movement which gives these ad hoc organisations their strength, their own dynamic and their real life behind the apparent forms, because the rank and file workers are totally involved and in a certain way no longer dominated by the relations of production. At this moment and as long as the struggle continues with the same strength, no time is wasted on thinking about a permanent rank and file organisation, because the present organising of the struggle is sufficient for the situation in which it was created and will change if the situation changes (for example if the struggle is widened).

Nobody think about a possible transformation into an alternative union, because this would be of no use for the struggle actually taking place. Even more, if we consider only one example: the French nurses coordinating committee of 1988, the autonomous struggle organisations are seen by all workers in struggle as more suitable for their purpose than all kinds of previous traditional organisations. Any transformation into a permanent and legal form can only be interpreted as an unnecessary initiative or even as a manipulation or step backwards. These things are completely different when the struggle is weakening or is finished, because what was giving life and strenght to these autonomous organisations is fading away, because the relations of production are again dominating the individual and collective relationships of the workers. The people (and not only the most active in the movement) having experienced another kind of relationship and efficiency in their struggle might want to perpetuate the impossible through a permanent organisation, eventually 'to start again'. This is the time of the inevitable integration process which we already have talked about. I believe that concerning the question posed, one can observe that the autonomous forms of organisation which in the past often were limited to a factory or a company, in the last years have taken the form of a generalisation to a national level, but in different forms in France and Italy. This process is maybe more evident clear in Italy than in France, with the inter-professional generalisation of the COBAS as different from the sectoral generalisation represented by the French coordinating committees (nurses, rail drivers). In France on the other hand, the pressure of the rank and file was stronger than in Italy where we could see more clearly a role of union militants (what the text calls 'union of councils'). This fact can also explain the stronger tendency in Italy towards transforming the rank and file structures into alternative organisations, in contrast to the difficult transformation and

fragmentation of the coordinating committee in France.

Another point would also be worth discussing, but is outside the scope of the Italian text: The small but widespread and real influence of organisations like the COBAS or the coordinating committees all over Europe. This should be considered in a dialectical process: on one hand a unification of the methods of exploitation, of the restructuring and of the positions of the traditional unions, on the other hand, as a consequence of this unification, the development of similar rank and file movements (3) seeing the intervention of the most active workers ('militants' or not) bringing with them their former experiences but also getting new experiences from this movement.

Even if it hasn't been developed in this discussion, the following point recently put forward by some comrades might provide a clue to understanding the failure of all the attempts to create alternative struggle organisations: The disappearance of all beliefs that a new society will be the outcome of the class struggle. This struggle of course exists and continues but its character has completely changed. This fact can explain both the decline of the unions and the inadequacy of the alternative organisations which can only appear as attempts to revive a past which here and there still impregnates the structures of the system. The example of United Kingdom would make it possible to conduct such a discussion and to consider the questions and problems posed in the Italian text from a completely different angle.

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#### Notes

- (1) An article was written about this concerning the French experiences and published in *liaisons* no.4/5. A summary of this article can be found in *Echanges* no.72/73, p.4.
- (2) See the article on struggles in the hospitals in France in this issue.
- (3) This point is raised also in the article about the French truck drivers' actions in this issue.

## CANADA SOME STRUGGLES

### Factory occupation

November '93 - In Sydney (Cape Breton area) in New Scotland: The factory Scotia Rope financed by the Canadian state and considered as a public property not to be touched, has been sold to an US company even though the local community had proposed to buy it for the same price. The 20 workers occupy the factory at the beginning of November to get the annulation of the sale. The new owner threatens to call the police to expel the workers, who threaten to mobilize the whole community to support them.

### Building workers in revolt

December '93 - A proposal for a law changing the working conditions in the building industry is discussed in the parliament. If it is passed, 26.000 workers out of 120.000 will lose all legal or contract protection. The unions ask the angry workers "not to hurry to fight". Teams of workers spontaneously go and visit the building sites, asking other workers to down tools. Started from some sites, the strike quickly spreads all over Quebec. The union leaders try to canalise the movement and the employers union try to get a court injunction from the Supreme Court.

But the movement spread even more and 3.12 most of the building sites are completely paralysed. A union leader declares: *I have never seen such an atmosphere of revolt... We have lost the control...* 6.12 between 20.000 and 40.000 workers are in front in the parliament; they symbolically burn a prefabricated house and a deputy is kicked. The employers get their injunction ordering the workers to resume work, but with no effect: the strike goes ahead in complete illegality. 13.12 underground groups for sabotage are formed. Repression becomes harder; 28 militants are arrested by special anti-riot squads. The parliament discuss a special law declaring the strike illegal: every striker could be sentenced up to 75.000 \$ for "incitation to strike" and banned from performing any union functions for five years, and the union deprived of any union fees during 12 weeks for each day or half a day of strike.

The union *FTQ-Construction* is called upon to do its job; if not its finances and organisation will be strongly affected. With the alternative to lose everything or to break the strike it chooses the last solution. 15.12 the FTQ-Construction stops the strike announcing a *Christmas truce*. The two laws, the first one having

originally caused the strike and the second one to break it, are voted before Christmas. After that the strike is not taken up again.

(From the *Echanges* bulletin *Dans le monde unde classe en lutte*. We thank a Canadian comrade for sending newspaper cuttings with information we otherwise might not have got hold of and would appreciate more from readers about Canada, both from English- and Canadian language papers.)

## POLAND SOME STRUGGLES

November 93 - In Walbrzych in the Silesia region 25% of the inhabitants are unemployed. 740 workers of the Porcelana factory have struck for two months against redundancies and low wages. The factory had been one of the first in the country to be privatised and the first effect had been 200 redundancies: the strike burst up immediately and the redundancies was cancelled. Today, the wages are as low as during the communist party dictatorship, but the workers then had low-rent accomodations, free nursery and holiday centers, maternity leaves for 3 years with full pay; all that has been swept away and has to be paid for now.

7/3/94 - The Solidarity union call for a campaign of some hours stoppages and demonstrations against the present government, asking for discussions on wages. These calls are somewhat confused because Solidarity which supported the previous government is now in the opposition more or less backing the Walesa opposition to the present parliament majority (a coalition of the peasant party and the ex- communist party).

(From the *Echanges* bulletin *Dans le monde unde classe en lutte*)

Material about Poland available from *Echanges*:  
\* *Le 25 juin 1976 en Pologne* - H. Simon (*Echanges*) (20FF)

\* *Poland 1980-82. Class struggle and the crisis of capital* - H. Simon (Black & Red) (£2) Also available in French and German.

